THE WHEEL O'FORTUNE

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By LOUIS TRACY

THE WHEEL O' FORTUNE

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"By the Prophet!" he exclaimed, "I am overjoyed at seeing you"
Frontispiece

The Wheel o' Fortune

BY

LOUIS TRACY

Author of "*The Wings of the Morning*," "*The Pillar of Light*," "*The Captain of the Kansas*," *etc.*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG

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The Wheel o' Fortune

CHAPTER I

WHEREIN FORTUNE TURNS HER WHEEL

AT ten o'clock on a morning in October — a dazzling, sunlit morning after hours of wind-lashed rain — a young man hurried out of Victoria Station and dodged the traffic and the mud-pools on his way towards Victoria Street. Suddenly he was brought to a stand by an unusual spectacle. A procession of the "unemployed" was sauntering out of Vauxhall Bridge Road into the more important street. Being men of leisure, the processionists moved slowly. The more alert pedestrian who had just emerged from the station did not grumble at the delay — he even turned it to advantage by rolling and lighting a cigarette. The ragged regiment filed past, a soiled, frayed, hopeless-looking gang. Three hundred men had gathered on the south side of the river, and were marching to join other contingents on the Thames Embankment, whence some thousands of them would be shepherded by policemen up Northumberland Avenue, across Trafalgar Square, and so, by way of Lower Regent Street and Piccadilly, to Hyde Park, where they would hoarsely cheer every

demagogue who blamed the Government for their miseries.

London, like Richard Royson, would stand on the pavement and watch them. Like him, it would drop a few coins into the collecting boxes rattled under its nose, and grin at the absurd figure cut by a very fat man who waddled notably among his leaner brethren, for hunger and substance are not often found so strangely allied. But, having salved its conscience by giving, and gratified its sarcastic humor by laughing, London took thought, perhaps, when it read the strange device on the banner carried by this Vauxhall contingent. "Curse your charity — we want work," said the white letters, staring threateningly out of a wide strip of red cotton. There was a brutal force in the phrase. It was Socialism in a tabloid. Many a looker-on, whose lot was nigh as desperate as that of the demonstrators, felt that it struck him between the eyes.

It had some such effect on Royson. Rather abruptly he turned away, and reached the less crowded Buckingham Palace Road. His face was darkened by a frown, though his blue eyes had a glint of humor in them. The legend on the banner had annoyed him. Its blatant message had penetrated the armor of youth, high spirits, and abounding good health. It expressed his own case with a crude vigor. The "unemployed" genius who railed at society in that virile line must have felt as he, Dick Royson, had begun to feel during the past fortnight, and the knowledge that

this was so was exceedingly distasteful. It was monstrous that he should rate himself on a par with those slouching wastrels. The mere notion brought its own confutation. Twenty-four years of age, well educated, a gentleman by birth and breeding, an athlete who stood six feet two inches high in his stockings, the gulf was wide, indeed, between him and the charity-cursers who had taken his money. Yet—the words stuck. . . .

Evidently, he was fated to be a sight-seer that morning. When he entered Buckingham Palace Road, the strains of martial music banished the gaunt specter called into being by the red cotton banner. A policeman, more cheerful and spry than his comrades who marshaled the procession shuffling towards Westminster, strode to the center of the busy crossing, and cast an alert eye on the converging lines of traffic. Another section of the ever-ready London crowd lined up on the curb. Nursemaids, bound for the parks, wheeled their perambulators into strategic positions, thus commanding a clear view and blocking the edge of the pavement. Drivers of omnibuses, without waiting for the lifted hand of authority, halted in Lower Grosvenor Gardens and Victoria Street. Cabs going to the station, presumably carrying fares to whom time meant lost trains, spurted to cross a road which would soon be barred. And small boys gathered from all quarters in amazing profusion. In a word, the Coldstream Guards were coming from Chelsea Barracks to do duty at St. James's, coming, too, in the approved manner of the Guards, with lively drumming

and clash of cymbals, while brass and reeds sang some jaunty melody of the hour.

The passing of a regimental band has whisked many a youngster out of staid Britain into the far lands. The lilt and swing of soldiers on the march have a glamour all the more profound because it is evanescent. That man must indeed be careworn who would resist it. Certainly, the broad-shouldered young giant who had been momentarily troubled by the white-red ghost of poverty was not so minded. He could see easily over the heads of the people standing on the edge of the pavement, so he did not press to the front among the rabble, but stood apart, with his back against a shop window. Thus, he was free to move to right or left as he chose. That was a slight thing in itself, an unconscious trick of aloofness — perhaps an inherited trait of occupying his own territory, so to speak. But it is these slight things which reveal character. They oft-times influence human lives, too; and no man ever extricated himself more promptly from the humdrum of moneyless existence in London than did Richard Royson that day by placing the width of the sidewalk between himself and the unbroken row of spectators. Of course, he knew nothing of that at the moment. His objective was an appointment at eleven o'clock in the neighborhood of Charing Cross, and, now that he was given the excuse, he meant to march along the Mall behind the Guards. Meanwhile, he watched their advance.

Above the tall bearskins and glittering bayonets he

caught the flourish of energetic drumsticks. The big drum gave forth its clamor with window-shaking insistence; it seemed to be the summons of power that all else should stand aside. On they came, these spruce Guards, each man a marching machine, trained to strut and pose exactly as his fellows. There was a sense of omnipotence in their rhythmic movement. And they all had the grand manner — from the elegant captain in command down to the smallest drummer-boy. Although the sun was shining brightly now, the earlier rain and hint of winter in the air had clothed all ranks in dark gray great-coats and brown leggings. Hence, to the untrained glance, they were singularly alike. Officers, sergeants, privates and bandsmen might have been cast in molds, after the style of toy soldiers. There were exceptions, of course, just as the fat man achieved distinction among the unemployed. The crimson sashes of the officers, the drum-major, with his twirling staff, the white apron of the big drummer, drew the eye. A slim subaltern, carrying the regimental color, held pride of place in the picture. The rich hues of the silk lent a barbaric splendor to his sober trappings. And he took himself seriously. A good-looking lad, with smooth contours not yet hardened to the military type, his face had in it a set gravity which proclaimed that he would bear that flag whithersoever his country's need demanded. And it was good to see him so intent on the mere charge of it in transit between Chelsea Barracks and the Guard-room at St. James's Palace. That argued

earnestness, an excellent thing, even in the Household Brigade.

Royson was amusing himself with the contrast between the two types of banner-bearers he had gazed at in the short space of five minutes — he was specially tickled by the fact that the Guards, also, were under police protection — when he became aware that the features of the color-lieutenant were familiar to him. A man in uniform, with forehead and chin partly hidden by warlike gear, cannot be recognized easily, if there be any initial doubt as to his identity. To determine the matter, Royson, instead of following in the rear as he had intended, stepped out briskly and placed himself somewhat ahead of the officer. He was near the drums before he could make sure that he was actually within a few yards of a former classmate. The knowledge brought a rush of blood to his face. Though glad enough to see unexpectedly one who had been a school friend, it was not in human nature that the marked difference between their present social positions should not be bitter to him. Here was "Jack" marching down the middle of the road in the panoply of the Guards, while "Dick," his superior during six long years at Rugby, was hurrying along the pavement, perhaps nearing the brink of that gulf already reached by the Vauxhall processionists.

So Dick Royson's placid temper was again ruffled, and he might have said nasty things about Fate had not that erratic dame suddenly thought fit to alter his

fortunes. As the street narrowed between lofty buildings, so did the blaring thunder of the music increase. The mob closed in on the soldiers' heels; the whole roadway was packed with moving men. A somber flood of humanity — topped by the drumsticks, the flag, the glistening bayonets and the bearskins — it seemingly engulfed all else in its path. The sparkle of the band, intensified by the quick, measured tramp of the soldiers, aroused a furtive enthusiasm. Old men, bearded and bent, men whom one would never suspect of having borne arms, straightened themselves, stood to attention, and saluted the swaying flag. Callow youths, hooligans, round-shouldered slouchers at the best, made shift to lift their heads and keep step. And the torrent caught the human flotsam of the pavement in its onward swirl. If Royson had not utilized that clear space lower down the street, it would have demanded the exercise of sheer force to reach the van of the dense gathering of nondescripts now following the drum.

Nevertheless, a clearance was made, and speedily, with the startling suddenness of a summer whirlwind. A pair of horses, attached to an open carriage, were drawn up in a by-street until the Guards had passed. So far as Royson was concerned, they were on the opposite side of the road, with their heads towards him. But he happened to be looking that way, because his old-time companion, the Hon. John Paton Seymour, was in the direct line of sight, and his unusual stature enabled him to see that both horses reared

simultaneously. They took the coachman by surprise, and their downward plunge dragged him headlong from the box. Instantly there was a panic among the mob. It melted away from the clatter of frenzied hoofs as though a live shell had burst in the locality. Two staccato syllables from the officer in command stopped the music and brought the Guards to a halt. The horses dashed madly forward, barely missing the color and its escort. A ready-witted sergeant grabbed at the loose reins flapping in the air, but they eluded him with a snake-like twist. The next wild leap brought the carriage pole against a lamp-post, and both were broken. Then one of the animals stumbled, half turned, backed, and locked the front wheels. A lady, the sole occupant, was discarding some heavy wraps which impeded her movements, evidently meaning to spring into the road, but she was given no time. The near hind wheel was already off the ground. In another second the carriage must be overturned, had not Royson, brought by chance to the right place, seized the off wheel and the back of the hood, and bodily lifted the rear part of the victoria into momentary safety. It was a fine display of physical strength and quick judgment. He literally threw the vehicle a distance of several feet. But that was not all. He saw his opportunity, caught the reins, and took such a pull at the terrified horses that a policeman and a soldier were able to get hold of their heads. The coachman, who had fallen clear, now ran up. With him came a gentleman in a fur coat. Royson was

about to turn and find out what had become of the lady, when some one said quietly:

"Well saved, King Dick!"

It was the Hon. John Seymour who spoke. Rigid as a statue, and almost as helpless, he was standing in the middle of the road, with his left hand holding the flag and a drawn sword in his right. Yet a school nickname bridged five years so rapidly that the man who had just been reviling Fate smiled at the picturesque officer of the Guards in the old, tolerant way, the way in which the hero of the eleven or fifteen permits his worshipers to applaud.

But this mutual recognition went no further. The Guards must on to St. James's. Some incomprehensible growls set them in motion again, the drum banged with new zest, and the street gradually emptied, leaving only a few curious gapers to surround the damaged victoria and the trembling horses. The fresh outburst of music brought renewed prancing, but the pair were in hand now, for Royson held the reins, and the mud-bedaubed coachman was ready to twist their heads off in his wrath.

"Don't know what took 'em," he was gasping to the policeman. "Never knew 'em be'ave like this afore. Quiet as sheep, they are, as a ryule."

"Too fat," explained the unemotional constable. "Give 'em more work an' less corn. Wot's your name an' address? There's this 'ere lamp-post to pay for. Cavalry charges in Buckingham Palace Road cost a bit."

An appreciative audience grinned at the official humor. But Royson was listening to the somewhat lively conversation taking place behind him.

"Are you injured in any way?" cried the gentleman in the fur coat, obviously addressing the lady in the victoria. The too accurate cadence in his words bespoke the foreigner, the man who has what is called "a perfect command" of English.

"Not in the least, thank you," was the answer. The voice was clear, musical, well-bred, and decidedly chilling. The two concluding words really meant "no thanks to you." The lady was, however, quite self-possessed, and, as a consequence, polite.

"But why in the world did you not jump out when I shouted to you?" demanded the man.

"Because you threw your half of the rug over my feet, and thus hindered me."

"Did I? *Ach, Gott!* Do you think I deserted you, then?"

"No, no. I did not mean that, Baron von Kerber. The affair was an accident, and you naturally thought I would follow your example. I did try, twice, to spring clear, but I lost my balance each time. We have no cause to blame one another. My view is that Spong was caught napping. Instead of arguing about things we might have done, we really ought to thank this gentleman, who prevented any further developments in some wonderful way not quite known to me yet."

The lady was talking herself into less caustic mood.

Perhaps she had not expected the Baron to shine in an emergency. Her calmness seemed to irritate him, though he was most anxious to put himself right with her.

"My object in jumping out so quickly was to run to the horses' heads," he said. "Unfortunately, I tripped and nearly fell. But why sit there? We must take a hansom. Or perhaps you would prefer to go by train?"

"Oh, a cab, by all means."

The horses were now standing so quietly that Royson handed the reins to the coachman, who was examining the traces. Then he was able to turn and look at the lady. He saw that she was young and pretty, but the heavy furs she wore half concealed her face, and the fact that his own garments were frayed, while his hands and overcoat were plastered with mud off the wheels, did not help to dissipate a certain embarrassment that gripped him, for he was a shy man where women were concerned. She, too, faltered a little, and the reason was made plain by her words.

"I do not know how to thank you," she said, and he became aware that she had wonderful brown eyes. "I think — you saved my life. Indeed, I am sure you did. Will you — call — at an address that I will give you. Mr. Fenshawe will be most anxious to — to — acknowledge your services."

"Oh, pray leave that to me, Miss Fenshawe," broke in the Baron, whose fluent English had a slight lisp. "Here is my card," he went on rapidly, looking at

Royson with calm assurance. "Come and see me this evening, at seven o'clock, and I will make it worth your while."

A glance at Royson's clothes told him enough, as he thought, to appraise the value of the assistance given. And he had no idea that his fair companion had really been in such grave danger. He believed that the shattering of the pole against the lamp standard had stopped the bolting horses, and that the tall young man now surveying him with a measuring eye had merely succeeded in catching the reins.

Royson lifted his hat to the lady, who had alighted, and was daintily gathering her skirts out of the mud.

"I am glad to have been able to help you, madam," he said. He would have gone without another word had not von Kerber touched his arm.

"You have not taken my card," said the man imperiously.

Some mischievous impulse, born of the turbulent emotions momentarily quelled by the flurry of the carriage accident, conquered Royson's better instincts. Though the Baron was tall, he towered above him. And he hardly realized the harshness, the vexed contempt, of his muttered reply:

"I don't want your charity, I want work."

At once he was conscious of his mistake. He had sunk voluntarily to the level of the Vauxhall paraders. He had even stolen their thunder. A twinge of self-denunciation drove the anger from his frowning eyes. And the Baron again thought he read his man correctly.

"I don't want your charity, I want work!"

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"Even so," he said, in a low tone, "take my card. I can find you work, of the right sort, for one who has brains and pluck, yes?"

The continental trick of ending with an implied question lent a subtle meaning to his utterance, and he helped it with covert glance and sour smile. Thus might Cæsar Borgia ask some minion if he could use a dagger. But Royson was too humiliated by his blunder to pay heed to hidden meanings. He grasped the card in his muddied fingers, and looked towards Miss Fenshawe, who was now patting one of the horses. Her aristocratic aloofness was doubly galling. She, too, had heard what he said, and was ready to classify him with the common herd. And, indeed, he had deserved it. He was wholly amazed by his own churlish outburst. Not yet did he realize that Fate had taken his affairs in hand, and that each step he took, each syllable he uttered in that memorable hour, were part and parcel of the new order of events in his life.

Quite crestfallen, he hurried away. He found himself inside the gates of the park before he took note of direction. Then he went to the edge of the lake, wetted his handkerchief, and rubbed off the worst of the mud-stains. While engaged in this task he calmed down sufficiently to laugh, not with any great degree of mirth, it is true, but with a grain of comfort at the recollection of Seymour's eulogy.

"King Dick!" he growled. "Times have changed since last I heard that name. By gad, five years can work wonders."

And, indeed, so can five seconds, when wonders are working, but the crass ignorance of humanity oft prevents the operation being seen. Be that as it may, Royson discovered that it was nearly eleven o'clock before he had cleaned his soiled clothes sufficiently to render himself presentable. As he set out once more for his rendezvous, he heard the band playing the old Guard back to quarters. The soldiers came down the Mall, but he followed the side of the lake, crossed the Horse-guards Parade, and reached the office for which he was bound at ten minutes past eleven. He had applied for a secretaryship, a post in which "a thorough knowledge of French" was essential, and he was received by a pompous, flabby little man, with side whiskers, for whom he conceived a violent dislike the moment he set eyes on him. Apparently, the feeling was mutual. Dick Royson was far too distinguished looking to suit the requirements of the podgy member for a county constituency, a legislator who hoped to score in Parliament by getting the Yellow Books of the French Chamber translated for his benefit.

"You are late, Mr. Royson," began the important one.

"Yes," said Dick.

"Punctuality —"

"Exactly, but I was mixed up in a slight mishap to a carriage."

"As I was about to remark," said the M.P., in his most impressive manner, "punctuality in business is

a *sine quâ non.* I have already appointed another secretary."

"Poor devil!" said Dick.

"How dare you, sir, speak to me in that manner?"

"I was thinking of him. I don't know him, but, having seen you, I am sorry for him."

"You impudent rascal —"

But Royson had fled. Out in the street, he looked up at the sky. "Is there a new moon?" he asked himself, gravely. "Am I cracked? Why did I pitch into that chap? If I'm not careful, I shall get myself into trouble to-day. I wonder if Jack Seymour will lend me enough to take me to South Africa? They say that war is brewing there. That is what I want — gore, bomb-shells, more gore. If I stay in London —"

Then he encountered a procession coming up Northumberland Avenue. Police, mounted and on foot, headed it. Behind marched the unemployed, thousands of them.

"If I stay in London," he continued, quite seriously, "I shall pick out a beefy policeman and fight him. Then I shall get locked up, and my name will be in the papers, and my uncle will see it, and have a fit, and die. I don't want my uncle to have a fit, and die, or I shall feel that I am responsible for his death. So I must emigrate."

Suddenly he recalled the words and manner of the Baron von Kerber. They came to him with the vivid-

ness of a new impression. He sought for the card in his pocket. "Baron Franz von Kerber, 118, Queen's Gate, W.," it read.

"Sounds like an Austrian name," he reflected. "But the girl was English, a thoroughbred, too. What was it he said? 'Work of the right sort, for a man with brains and pluck.' Well, I shall give this joker a call. If he wants me to tackle anything short of crime, I'm his man. Failing him, I shall see Jack to-morrow, when he is off duty."

A red banner was staggering up Northumberland Avenue, and he caught a glimpse of a fat man in the midst of the lean ones.

"Oh, dash those fellows, they give me the hump," he growled, and he turned his back on them a second time. But no military pomp or startled horses offered new adventure that day. He wandered about the streets, ate a slow luncheon, counted his money, seventeen shillings all told, went into the British Museum, and dawdled through its galleries until he was turned out. Then he bought a newspaper, drank some tea, and examined the shipping advertisements.

His mind was fixed on South Africa. Somehow, it never occurred to him that the fur-clothed Baron might find him suitable employment. Nevertheless, he went to 118, Queen's Gate, at seven o'clock. The footman who opened the door seemed to be expecting him.

"Mr. King?" said the man.

This struck Royson as distinctly amusing.

"Something like that," he answered, but the footman had the face of a waxen image.

"This way, Mr. King."

And Royson followed him up a wide staircase, marveling at the aptness of the name.

CHAPTER II

THE COMPACT

THE Baron Franz von Kerber was in evening dress. He was engrossed in the examination of a faded, or discolored, document when Royson was shown into an apartment, nominally the drawing-room, which the present tenant had converted into a spacious study. An immense map of the Red Sea littoral, drawn and colored by hand, hung on one of the walls; there were several chart cases piled on a table; and a goodly number of books, mainly ancient tomes, were arranged on shelves or stacked on floor and chairs. This was the room of a worker. Von Kerber's elegant exterior was given a new element of importance by his surroundings.

That was as much as Royson could note before the Baron looked up from the letter he was reading. It demanded close scrutiny, because it was written in Persi-Arabic.

"Ah, glad to see you, Mr. King," he said affably. "Sit there," and he pointed to an empty chair. Dick knew that this seat in particular was selected because it would place him directly in front of a cluster of electric lights. He waited until the door was closed.

"By the way," he said, "why do you call me 'King'? That is not my name, but it is rather extraordinary that you should have hit on it, because it is part of a nickname I had at school."

He was fully at ease now. Poverty and anxiety can throw even a Napoleon out of gear, but Richard Royson was hard as granite in some ways, and the mere decision to go to South Africa had driven the day's distempered broodings from his mind.

"I thought I heard the officer who spoke to you in Buckingham Palace Road address you as King," explained von Kerber.

"Yes, that is true," admitted Royson. He felt that it would savor of the ridiculous, in his present circumstances, were he to state his nickname in full and explain the significance of it. In fact, he was resolved to accept the five-pound note which the Baron would probably offer him, and be thankful for it. Hence, the pseudonym rather soothed his pride.

Von Kerber placed the Arabic scrawl under a paperweight. He was a man who plumed himself on a gift of accurate divination. Such a belief is fatal. For the third time that day, he misunderstood the Englishman's hesitancy.

"What's in a name?" he quoted, smilingly. "Suppose I continue to call you King? It is short, and easily remembered, and your English names puzzle me more than your language, which is difficult enough, yes?"

"Then we can leave it at that," agreed Royson.

"I thought so. Well, to come to business. What can you do?"

"It would be better, perhaps, if you told me what you want me to do."

"Can you ride?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been to sea?"

Royson pricked up his ears at this. "The sea" suggested undreamed-of possibilities. And von Kerber certainly had the actor's facial art of conveying much more than the mere purport of his words. The map, the charts, assumed a new meaning. Were they scenic accessories? Had this foreigner taken the whim to send him abroad on some mission? He decided to be less curt in his statements.

"If I simply answered your question I should be compelled to say 'No,'" he replied. "So far as my actual sea-going is concerned, it has consisted of trips across the Channel when I was a boy. Yet I am a fair sailor. I can handle a small yacht better than most men of my age. My experience is confined to a lake, but it is complete in that small way. And I taught myself the rudiments of navigation — as a pastime."

"Ah!"

The Baron expressed both surprise and gratification by the monosyllable. Royson was weighing his companion closely now, and he came to the conclusion that there were qualities in that tall, thin, somewhat effeminate personality which he had not detected dur-

ing their brief meeting of the morning. Von Kerber was good-looking, with something of the dignity and a good deal of the aspect of a bird of prey. His slender frame was well-knit. His sinuous hands hinted at unexpected strength. Were Royson told that his possible employer was a master of the rapier he would have credited it. And the Baron, for his part, was rapidly changing the first-formed estimate of his guest.

"Pray forgive me if I seem to intrude on your personal affairs," he said; "but, taking your own words, you are — how do you say it — *schlimm — aux abois —*"

"Hard up. Yes."

"What? You speak German, or is it French?"

"German, a little. I am understandable in French."

"Ah."

Again von Kerber paused. Royson smiled. Had he striven to mislead the other man as to his character he could not have succeeded so admirably. And the Baron read the smile according to his own diagnosis. He was sure that this well-educated, gentlemanly, yet morose-mannered young Englishman was under a cloud — that he had broken his country's laws, and been broken himself in the process. And von Kerber was searching for men of that stamp. They would do things that others, who pinned their faith to testimonials, certificates, and similar vouchers of repute, might shy at.

"I think you are one to be trusted?" he went on.

"I am glad you think that."

"Yes. I soon make up my mind. And to-day you acted as one man among a thousand. Miss Fenshawe, the lady in the carriage, enlightened me afterwards. I saw only part of your fine behavior. You were quick and fearless. Those are the qualities I seek, but I demand obedience, too, and a still tongue, yes?"

"I would not betray a man who trusted me," said Dick. "If I disagreed with you I would leave you. I fell out with the son of my last employer, so I left him, a fortnight ago. Yet I have kept my reasons to myself."

The memory of that falling out was yet vivid. He had filled the position of foreign correspondence clerk to an export firm in the city. One evening, returning late to the office, he surprised the typist, a rather pretty girl, in tears. She blurted out some broken words which led him to interview the young gentleman who represented the budding talent of the house; and the result was lamentable. The senior partner dismissed him next day, telling him he was lucky he had escaped arrest for a murderous assault, and, as for the girl, she was like the rest of her class, anxious only to inveigle a rich young fool into marriage. The point of view of both father and son was novel to Royson, and their ethics were vile, but he gave the girl, who was sent away at the same time, half of the six pounds he had in his pocket, and wished he had used his fist instead of his open hand on the junior partner's face.

This, of course, had singularly little bearing on his declaration to von Kerber, who metaphorically stuck

his talons into that portion of Royson's utterance which interested him. He bent across the table, leaning on his curved fingers, spread apart, like claws.

"Ah," he said slowly. "That is good. You would not betray a man who trusted you. You mean that?"

"I do."

"Very well, then. I offer you the position of second mate on my yacht, the *Aphrodite*. She is a sailing vessel, with auxiliary steam, a seaworthy craft, of two hundred and eighty tons. I pay well, but I ask good service. The salary is £20 per month, all found. The captain, two officers, and fourteen men receive ten per cent of the gross profits of a certain undertaking — the gross profits, remember — divided in proportion to their wages. If successful, your share, small though it sounds, will be large enough to make you a comparatively rich man. Do you accept, yes?"

Dick Royson felt his heart thumping against his ribs. "Why, of course, I accept," he cried. "But your terms are so generous, to a man without a profession, that I must ask you one thing? Is the affair such as an honest man can take part in?"

"It is. No one can cavil at its honesty. Yet we may encounter difficulties. There may be fighting, not against a government, but to defend our — our gains — from those who would rob us."

"I'm with you, heart and soul," cried Royson, stirred out of his enforced calmness. "Indeed, I am

exceedingly obliged to you. I am at a loss to account for my amazing good luck."

The Baron snapped his fingers with a fine air. "Good luck!" he exclaimed. "There is no such thing. A man with intelligence and nerve grasps the opportunity when it presents itself. You took it this morning. You may say that you might not have been given the chance. Nonsense, my dear Mr. King! Missing that, you would have found another. Let me tell you that I have created a place for you on the ship's roll. You took my fancy. I had already secured my crew. They are all Englishmen — stupid fellows, some of them, but trustworthy. You are a trustworthy race, yes?"

"That is our repute. I have met exceptions."

"Oh, as for that, every man has his price. That is why I pay well. Now, I am going out to dine. The *Aphrodite* sails this week. You will sign an agreement, yes?"

"Delighted," said Dick, though bitter experience had taught him that von Kerber's last question might reveal some disagreeable feature hitherto unseen, just as the sting of the scorpion lies in its tail.

The Baron handed him a printed document.

"Read that," he said. "You need have no fear of legal quibbles. It contains nothing unreasonable, but I insist on its observance in letter and spirit."

Certainly, no unfair demand was made by the brief contract which Royson glanced at. He noticed that the *Aphrodite* was described as "owned by Hiram

Fenshawe, Esq., of Chalfount Manor, Dorset, and Emperor's Gate, London, W.," while Baron Franz von Kerber figured as "controller and head of the expedition." The agreement was to hold good for six months, with an option, "vesting solely in the said Baron Franz von Kerber," to extend it, month by month, for another equal period. There were blanks for dates and figures ——, and one unusual clause read:

"The undersigned hereby promises not to divulge the vessel's destination or mission, should either, or both, become known to him; not to give any information which may lead to inquiry being made by others as to her destination or mission, and not to make any statement, in any form whatsoever, as to the success or otherwise of the voyage at its conclusion, unless at the request of the said Baron Franz von Kerber. The penalty for any infringement of this clause, of which Baron Franz von Kerber shall be the judge, shall be dismissal, without any indemnity or payment of the special bonus hereinafter recited."

Then followed the salary clause, and a stipulation as to the ten per cent share of the gross profits. The Baron's promises could not have been phrased in more straightforward style.

"Give me a pen," said Royson, placing the paper on a blotting pad.

There was an unconscious masterfulness in his voice and manner which seemed to startle von Kerber. In very truth, the younger man was overjoyed at the astounding turn taken by his fortunes. The restraint he had imposed on himself earlier was gone. He

wanted to wring the Baron's hand and hail him as his best friend. Perhaps the other deemed this attitude a trifle too free and easy in view of the relations that would exist between them in the near future.

"You will find a pen on the ink-stand," said he, quietly, stooping over some papers on a corner of the table. Then he added, apparently as an afterthought:

"Don't forget your name, Mr. King."

The hint brought Royson back to earth. He signed "Richard King," dried the ink carefully, and marveled a little at his re-christening and its sequel.

"When and where shall I report myself for duty, sir?" he asked.

Von Kerber looked up. His tone grew affable again, and Dick had learnt already that it is a token of weakness when a man insists on his own predominance.

"First let me fill in a date and the amount of your salary." The Baron completed and signed a duplicate. "Get that stamped at Somerset House, in case of accident," he continued, "I might have been killed this very day, you know. One of my servants will witness both documents. Before he comes in, put this envelope in your pocket. It contains half of your first month's salary in advance, and you will find in it a card with the address of a firm of clothiers, who will supply your outfit free of charge. Call on them early to-morrow, as the time is short, and you are pretty long, yes? Report yourself to the same people at four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon. They will have

your baggage ready, and give you full directions. From that moment you are in my service. And now, the order is silence, yes?"

While the Baron was speaking he touched an electric bell. The waxen-faced man-servant appeared, laboriously wrote "William Jenkins" where he was bid, and escorted Royson to the door. The Baron merely nodded when Dick said "Good night, sir." He had picked up an opera hat and overcoat from a chair, but was bestowing a hasty farewell glance on the Persi-Arabic letter.

A closed carriage and pair of horses were standing in front of the house, and Royson recognized the coachman. It was that same Spong who had groveled in the mud of Buckingham Palace Road nine hours ago. And the man knew him again, for he raised his whip in a deferential salute.

"Not much damage done this morning?" cried Dick.

"No, sir. I drove 'em home afterwards, broken pole an' all," said Spong.

"That's not the same pair, is it?"

"No, sir. This lot is theayter, the bays is park."

So Mr. Hiram Fenshawe, whoever he was, owned the yacht, and ran at least two fine equipages from his town house. He must be a wealthy man. Was he the father of that patrician maid whose gratitude had not stood the strain of Royson's gruffness? Or, it might be, her brother, seeing that he was associated with von Kerber in some unusual enterprise? What was it? he wondered. "There may be fighting," said

von Kerber. Dick was glad of that. He had taken a solemn vow to his dying mother that he would not become a soldier, and the dear lady died happy in the belief that she had snatched her son from the war-dragon which had bereft her of a husband. The vow lay heavy on the boy's heart during many a year, for he was a born man-at-arms, but he had kept it, and meant to keep it, though not exactly according to the tenets of William Penn. Somehow, his mother's beautiful face, wanly exquisite in that unearthly light which foreshadows the merging of time into eternity, rose before him now as he passed from the aristocratic dimness of Prince's Gate into the glare and bustle of Knightsbridge. A newsboy rushed along, yelling at the top of his voice. The raucous cry took shape: "Kroojer's reply. Lytest from Sarth Hafricar." That day's papers had spoken of probable war, and Royson wanted to be there. He had dreamed of doing some work for the press, and was a reader and writer in his spare time, while he kept his muscles fit by gymnastics. But those past yearnings were merged in his new calling. He was a sailor now, a filibuster of sorts. The bo's'n's whistle would take the place of the bugle-call. Would that have pleased his mother? Well, poor soul, she had never imagined that her son would be compelled to chafe his life out at a city desk. The very air of London had become oppressive; the hurrying crowd was unsympathetic to his new-found joy of living; so, without any well-defined motive, he sought the ample solitude of the park.

Be it noted that he usually went straight from point to point without regard to obstacles. Hence, in his devious wanderings of that remarkable day, he was departing from fixed habit, and, were he a student of astrology, he would assuredly have sought to ascertain what planets were in the ascendant at a quarter-past ten in the morning, and half-past seven in the evening. For he had scarcely reached the quiet gloom of the trees when a man, who had followed him since he quitted von Kerber's house, overtook him and touched his arm.

"Beg pardon," said the stranger, "but are you the gentleman who called on Baron von Kerber half an hour ago?"

"Yes." Taken unawares, Dick was thrown off his guard for the instant.

"And you left his house just now?"

"Yes."

"To prevent a mistake, may I ask your name?"

"Certainly. It is Royson, Richard Royson."

"And address?"

A curious ring of satisfaction in the newcomer's voice carried a warning note with it. Dick was conscious, too, that he had departed from the new rôle assigned to him by his employer, yet it would be absurd to begin explaining that he was not known as Royson, but as King, in connection with von Kerber. The blunder annoyed him, and he faced his questioner squarely.

"Before I give you any more information I want to know who you are," he said.

His downright way of speaking appeared to carry conviction.

"Well, Mr. Royson, I don't mind telling you that I am a private inquiry agent," was the ominous answer. "I am retained by a gentleman who brings a very serious charge against von Kerber, and, as I have reason to believe that you are only slightly mixed up in this affair at present, I am commissioned to offer you a handsome reward for any valuable information you may give my client or procure for him in the future."

"Indeed!" said Dick, who was debating whether or not to knock the man down.

"Yes. We mean business, I assure you. This is no common matter. Von Kerber is an Austrian, and my client is an Italian. Perhaps you know how they hate each other as nations, and these two have a private quarrel as well."

"What does your employer want to find out?" asked Dick.

"Well, as a start, he wants to know why von Kerber is shipping a crew for a yacht called the *Aphrodite*."

"Then he has learned something already?"

"Oh, that was too easy. Any one can pump a half-drunken sailor."

The private inquiry agent spoke confidentially. He fancied he had secured the sort of aide he needed, a spy of superior intelligence.

"Suppose I give you that first item of news, what is the figure?"

"Say a fiver."

"But I am almost willing to pay that much for the pleasure of spreading your nose over your face."

There was a sudden gap between the two. Perhaps the stranger felt that the rawness of the atmosphere demanded brisk movement.

"Oh, is that it?" snarled he.

"Yes, that is it."

"You had better be careful what you are doing." Dick had advanced a pace, but the agent sheered off twice as far, as though the air between them was not only cold but resilient.

"I shall be quite careful. Just one small punch, say a sovereign's worth. Come, that is cheap enough."

Then the man ran off at top speed. Royson could have caught him in a few strides, but he did not move. He had not meant to hit, only to scare, yet the incident was perplexing, and the more he pondered over it the less pleased he was at his own lack of finesse, as he might have learnt something without fear of indiscretion, seeing that he had nothing to tell. Nevertheless, his final decision was in favor of the first impulse. Von Kerber had treated him with confidence — why should he wish to possess any disturbing knowledge of von Kerber?

But he refused to be shadowed like a thief. He stepped out, left the park at Stanhope Gate, jumped on to a passing omnibus, changed it for another in the middle of Oxford Street, and walked down Regent Street with a well-founded belief that he had defeated

espionage for the time. Thereafter, he behaved exactly like several hundred thousand young men in London that night. He dined, bought some cigars, rare luxuries to him, went to a music-hall, soon wearied of its inanities, and traveled by an early train to Brixton, where he rented cheap lodgings.

He slept the sleep of sound digestion, which is so often confused with a good conscience, and rose betimes. At a city tailoring establishment he was measured dubiously, being far removed from stock size. But a principal made light of difficulties, and Royson noticed that he was to be supplied with riding breeches and boots in addition to a sea-faring kit, while a *sola topi*, or pith helmet, appeared in the list.

He asked no questions, was assured that all would be in readiness at four o'clock that day, and found himself turned loose again in London at an early hour with nothing to do. And what do you think he did? He caught a Mansion-House train to Victoria, waylaid the Guards a second time, marched with them valiantly to St. James's, and took a keen delight in their stately pageant. He saw his friend, Seymour, strolling to and fro with a brother officer in the tiny square, and watched him march back to Chelsea with the relieved guard.

Then, with all the zest of seeing London from a new standpoint, that of moneyed idleness, he strolled towards Hyde Park. He took the road known as the Ladies' Mile, crossed the Serpentine by the bridge, and came back by the Row. There, near the Albert

Gate crossing, a lady had reined in her chestnut hunter and was talking to an old gentleman standing near the rails. Had Royson stared at her, he might have remembered the eyes, and the finely-cut contours of nose, lips and chin. But his acquaintance with fashionable society had been severed so completely that he was not aware of the new code which permits its votaries to stare at a pretty woman; and a riding-habit offers sharp contrast to a set of sables. He was passing, all unconscious of the interest he had aroused in the lady, when he heard her say:

"Why, grandfather, there he is. Good morning, Mr. King. Mr. Fenshawe and I were just talking about you."

Royson would have known her voice anywhere. It had the rare distinction of music and perfect diction. Amidst the shrill vulgarity which counterfeited wit in the average upper class gathering of the period such a voice must have sounded like the song of a robin in a crowded rookery.

The unexpected greeting brought a rush of color to Dick's face. But yesterday's cloud had vanished, and his natural embarrassment was obviously that of a well-bred man young enough to be delighted by the recognition. Moreover, he was not covered with mud, nor had his sensibilities been jarred by standards representing the hell and heaven of modern existence.

He lifted his hat.

"I am glad to see you have experienced no ill effects from yesterday's shock, Miss Fenshawe," he said.

"Not in the least. It was a wonderful escape. Even the victoria leaves hospital this afternoon, I am told."

Mr. Fenshawe, whose silvery-white hair and wrinkled skin betokened an age that his erect, spare frame would otherwise have concealed, patted Royson's shoulder.

"You did well, Mr. King, very well. I am much beholden to you. And I was pleased to hear from Baron von Kerber last night that you have joined our expedition."

Though of middle height, Mr. Fenshawe had to raise his hand as high as his own forehead to reach Dick's back. His eyes were shrewd and keen, with the introspective look of the student. Though it was more than probable that he was very wealthy, judging from the meager details within Royson's ken, he had the semblance of a university professor rather than a millionaire.

"I think the good fortune is wholly mine, sir," said Dick, trying to answer both at once, and puzzled to determine how he could repudiate the name which von Kerber had fastened on to him.

"No, we will not put it that way," and the other seemed to sweep some confusing thought from before his mental vision. "Let us say that the reward will be commensurate with the deed. We do not forget, we Fenshawes; do we, Irene? Good day, Mr. King. I hope to make your better acquaintance. We shall see much of each other ere long."

Thus dismissed, with another friendly tap on the shoulder, Royson had no option but to raise his hat again. He received a very gracious smile from Miss Fenshawe, and he left the two with a curious consciousness that there was at least one woman in the world who had the power to send his blood whirling through his veins.

As he walked off under the trees, the eyes of grandfather and granddaughter followed him.

"A useful man that, for work in the desert," said Mr. Fenshawe.

"Yes. Quite a Crusader in appearance," mused the girl aloud.

The old man laughed noiselessly.

"I find you are only half persuaded as to the peaceable nature of our task, Irene," he said.

"I find it even more difficult to persuade you that Count von Kerber fears interference, grandad."

"My dear child, these foreigners are all nerves. Look at me. I have spent twenty years of my life among the Arabs, and felt safer there than in a London crowd."

"Yes, you dear old thing, but you are not Count von Kerber."

"Nerves, Irene, nothing else. At any rate, your Mr. King should adjust the average in that respect. And if you begin to talk of risk I shall have to reconsider my decision to take you with us."

The chestnut threw up his head, and pranced excitedly, having been warned that a gallop was imminent.

"No, you don't," laughed Irene. "If we Fenshawes do not forget, we also stick together. By-by. See you at lunch."

And she was gone, sitting her horse with the ease and sureness of one of those Arabs in whom her grandfather placed such confidence.

CHAPTER III

A CHANGE OF SKY, BUT NOT OF HABIT

Royson had time and to spare for the analysis of events during the remainder of the day. In spite of von Kerber's repudiation of luck, he believed that the fickle jade sometimes favored a man, and he counted himself thrice fortunate in having met with an adventure leading to such an unforeseen opening. He realized too, that had he been better dressed — were his words and manners modeled on smooth convention — he would not have received the offer of employment on board the *Aphrodite.* Looked at in cold blood, there was nothing sinister in von Kerber's wish to keep his business affairs private. If the Baron were mixed up in a quarrel with some unknown Italian, his association with people like Mr. Fenshawe and his granddaughter supplied a valid excuse for observing a certain secrecy.

To guess the nature of the yacht's mission was more difficult. Any reader of newspapers was aware that Morocco, Montenegro and Armenia, not to mention the political volcanoes of Finland, Poland, and Carlist centers in Spain, provided scope for international intrigue even in these prosaic days. But it was a

vain thing to imagine that the Fenshawes would be involved in any wild-cat scheme of that sort. The natural sequel to this thought was — who were they? and the nearest Free Library answered promptly:

"Fenshawe, Hiram, C.M.G., 2d Class Osmanieh. Hon. Fellow of Caius College, Cambridge, landowner and colliery proprietor, an enthusiastic Egyptologist, vice-President of Upper Egypt Exploration Society; has devoted immense sums of money and many years of his life to Egyptian archæological research. His private collection of coins, pottery, gold, silver and bronze ornaments, and other works of art having special reference to the Roman occupation of Egypt, is probably unequaled. . . . Born at Liverpool, March 20, 1830; married, June 10, 1854, Hilda, daughter of Sir Adolphus Livingston, Nairn. Only son, Hildebrand, born April 27, 1856; married, December 20, 1880, Irene, 2d daughter of the late Dr. Alfred Stowell, LL.D., Master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Hildebrand Fenshawe were lost in the wreck of the P. &. O. liner *Bokhara*, off the Pescadores Islands, 1892, leaving one daughter, Irene Hildegarde, born February 11, 1882."

The book supplied other details, but Royson obtained from the foregoing extracts a sufficiently clear idea of the identity of the two people whom he had encountered in the park. Of course, he set his wits to work instantly to construct new avenues for the promised activity of the *Aphrodite*, but, these imaginings being as hopelessly mistaken as are most other human peeps into futurity, they served only to keep him on tenterhooks until he revisited the outfitters' establishment.

There he was handed the keys of two large steel trunks, canvas-covered, and requested to assure himself that they contained all the articles set forth on a list. The manager also gave him a first-class ticket for Marseilles, and a typewritten instruction that he was to travel by the nine o'clock train from Victoria that evening. On arriving at the French port he would find the *Aphrodite* moored in No. 3. Basin, and he was requested not to wear any portion of his uniform until on board the yacht.

The nature of the arrangements, the prodigal supply of clothing, rather took Dick's breath away. Even the initials, "R. K.," were painted on the trunks and stitched on to the canvas.

"My employer seems to have done things pretty thoroughly," he could not help saying.

The shopman dug a compliment out of the remark.

"Our house has a reputation to maintain," he answered, "and Mr. Fenshawe is one of our best and oldest customers."

There was no mention of Count von Kerber, which added a ripple to the wave of astonishment in Royson's breast. He took his baggage to Charing Cross in a cab, and deposited it there. Meanwhile, he learned from a further scrutiny of the list that his own few belongings were hardly wanted. He had not been so well equipped since he left Heidelberg to rush to his mother's death-bed. Nevertheless, having already gathered in a valise some books, photographs, letters, and other odds and ends, he went to Brixton to obtain them.

While giving a farewell glance around his dingy room, an old envelope, thrown aside overnight, reminded him of a half-formed idea, which appealed to him strongly now that he knew his port of departure.

So he wrote a short letter:

"DEAR MR. FORBES:

"You were kind to me four years ago, as kind as Sir Henry Royson would permit you to be towards one who had wilfully and irreparably insulted him. My feelings with regard to him have undergone no change. He may be dead, for all I know, or care. But you, I suppose, are still the trusted solicitor of the Cuddesham estate, and Sir Henry Royson, if alive, may have remained unmarried. In that event, I am heir to a barren title, and it may save you some trouble if I inform you that I am leaving England. For reasons of no consequence, I am passing under the name of Richard King. If I return, or settle down in some other land, I will write to you, say, after the lapse of a year. Please regard this note as strictly private, and do not interpret it as foreshadowing any attempt on my part to arrive at a reconciliation with Sir Henry Royson."

He was about to add the briefest announcement of his new career, but he checked himself; had not von Kerber forbidden the giving of any information?

He signed the letter, and addressed it to the senior partner of a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Then, indeed, he felt that he had snapped the last slender link that bound him to the dull life of the city. Like Kent, he vowed that "freedom lies hence, and banishment is here." And he had always hated Brixton, which was unjust to that pleasant suburb, but

the days of his sojourn there had been days of bondage.

He was among the first to secure a seat in the Continental mail. Having registered those superb trunks through to Marseilles, and reserved a comfortable corner by depositing his valise there, he strolled up and down the platform, and quietly scrutinized his fellow passengers. So far as he could judge, none of the earlier arrivals were prospective shipmates. Two bronzed men, of free gait, with that trick of carrying the hands back to front which singles out the sailor from the rest of humanity, drew him like a lodestone. But he soon discovered that they were P. & O. officers, bidding farewell to a friend bound for Egypt.

At last he came upon a man and a woman, a remarkable pair under any circumstances, but specially interesting to him, seeing that the man gripped an ancient carpet bag on which was pasted a label with the glaring superscription: "Captain John Stump, yacht *Aphrodite*, Marsails." The address was half written, half printed, and the quaintly phonetic spelling of the concluding word betrayed a rugged independence of thought which was certainly borne out by Captain John Stump's appearance. The written label might be wrong; not so that stamped by Neptune on a weather-beaten face and a figure like a capstan. Little more than five feet in height, he seemed to be quite five feet wide. If it be true that a poet is born, not made, Captain Stump was a master mariner from his cradle. Royson had never before seen such a man. Drawn

out to Royson's stature he would yet have remained the broader of the two. The lady with him, evidently Mrs. Stump, was mated for him by happy chance. Short men usually marry tall women, and your sons of Anak will select wives of fairy-like proportions. But Mrs. Stump was even shorter than her husband, and so plump withal, that a tape measure round her shoulders might have given her the prize for girth.

Captain Stump was examining the interior of each carriage suspiciously when he set eyes on the P. & O. officers.

"Port yer hellum, Becky," he growled, and the two turned to the right-about. It happened that he entered Royson's compartment. There were not many first-class passengers that night, so Royson promptly took possession of his own corner, lit a pipe, and unobtrusively watched his future commander. This was not difficult, as Stump stood near the open door, and each word he uttered was audible.

"Don't want to berth alongside sailor-men to-night, Becky," he said, after sizing up Dick in a comprehensive glance. "Them's my sailin' orders. 'Hoist no colors,' sez he, 'until you bring to at Marseilles.'"

"What's your first port of call, John?" asked his wife.

"Dunno. I'll send you a wire."

A pause. Then Mrs. Stump:

"Will you be long in Marseilles, John?"

Dick thought that this would be impossible anywhere, but Stump answered:

"Mebbe half an hour, mebbe a week. You know all that I know, Becky."

"It's funny."

Captain Stump spat, and agreed that it was — emphatically funny. A ticket inspector approached.

"Going on, sir?" he asked.

"Goin' on? Of course I am. What in thunder d'ye think I'm stannin' here for?" demanded the captain.

"But if you stand there, sir, you'll get left," said the official good-humoredly.

"Better get in, John, an' don't argy with the gentleman," said Mrs. Stump.

Her husband obeyed, grudgingly. The inspector examined his ticket, and Royson's, and locked the door.

"Nice thing!" grumbled Stump. "I can't give you a good-by hug now, Becky."

This was literally true. The captain's breadth of beam had never been contemplated by the designers of South-Eastern railway carriages. Even when the door was open, he had to enter sideways, and the brass rail across the window rendered it a physical impossibility to thrust head and shoulders outside.

The shrill whistle of a guard was answered by a colleague.

"Take care of yourself, John," said Becky.

"No fear! And mind you wait till the 'bus stops to-night. The other evening —"

Royson never learnt what had befallen Mrs. Stump

on that other evening. At the moment the train began to move, he saw a man peeping into the carriage as if he were looking for some one. He believed it was the private inquiry agent whom he had shaken off so effectively in Hyde Park. The gloom of the station, and the fact that the man's face was in shadow, made him doubtful, but, as the train gathered speed, the watcher on the platform nodded to him and smiled derisively. Captain Stump had quick eyes. He turned to Royson.

"Beg pardon, mister, but is that a friend of yours?" he asked.

"No," said Dick.

"Well, he was signalin' somebody, an' it wasn't me."

Then remarking that the unknown craft looked like a curiously-colored pirate, the captain squeezed himself into a seat. When the train ran into and backed out of Cannon Street, Stump was puzzled. He opened the carpet bag, and drew forth a ship's compass, which he consulted. After a few minutes' rapid traveling his doubts seemed to subside, and he replaced the compass. Producing a cake of tobacco, he cut off several shavings with an exceedingly sharp knife, rolled them between his broad palms, filled a pipe, lit it, and whetted the knife on the side of his boot. Dick noticed that all his actions were wonderfully nimble for a man of his build. Any stranger who imagined that this squat Hercules was slow and ponderous in movement would be wofully mistaken if he based hostilities on that presumption.

Perhaps the captain missed the companionship of the stout lady he had parted from at Charing Cross, or it might be that his gruffness was a matter of habit — at any rate, after a puff or two, he spoke to Royson again.

"D'ye know wot time we're due at Dover?" he asked.

"Yes, at 10.50."

"We don't stop long there?"

"No. The boat sails ten minutes later."

"Good. I don't cotton on to these blessed trains. Every time they jolt I fancy we're on the rocks. Give me a ship, an' the steady beat of the screw, sez I. Then I know where I am."

"I quite agree with you, captain, but you must put up with a fair spell of railway bumping before you reach Marseilles."

Stump gave him a questioning look. Royson did not resemble the type of land shark with which he was familiar. Yet his eyes gleamed like those of a perplexed bull.

"I s'pose you heard my missus an' me talking of Marseilles," he growled, "but how do you know I'm a captain."

"It is written on your bag."

"Well, my missus wrote that —"

"Moreover," went on Dick, determined to break the ice, "I'm your second mate."

"Wot?" roared Stump, leaning forward and placing a hand on each knee, while his fiery glance took in

every detail of Royson's appearance. "You — my — second — mate?"

The words formed a crescendo of contemptuous analysis. But Dick faced the storm boldly.

"Yes," he said. "I don't see any harm in stating the fact, now that I know who you are."

"Harm! Who said anything about harm? Wot sort of sailor d'ye call yerself? Who ever heard of a sailor in knickers?"

Then it dawned on Royson that the captain's wrath was comprehensible. There is in every male Briton who goes abroad an ingrained instinct that leads him to don a costume usually associated with a Highland moor. Why this should be no man can tell, but nine out of ten Englishmen cross the Channel in sporting attire, and Royson was no exception to the rule. In his case a sheer revolt against the "office" suit had induced him to dress in clothes which recalled one glorious summer on the Westmoreland hills. Their incongruity did not appeal to him until Captain Stump forcibly drew attention thereto, and his hearty laugh at the way in which he was enlightened did not tend to soothe his skipper's indignation.

"Second mate!" bellowed Stump again, calling the heavens to witness that there never was such another. "Where's yer ticket? Seein' is believin', they say. Who did you go to sea with? When did you pass?"

"I have no certificate, if that is what you mean, and I have never been to sea," said Royson.

This remark impressed Stump as an exquisite joke. His rage yielded to a rumble of hoarse laughter.

"Lord love a duck!" he guffawed. "If only I'd ha' knowed, I could have told my missus. It would have cheered her up for a week. Never mind. We've a few minutes in Dover. I'll send her a picture post-card. It'll 'arf tickle 'er to death."

Evidently the captain meant to add certain explanatory remarks which would account for that Gargantuan tickling. Dick, anxious not to offend his future commander, smiled sheepishly, and said:

"Sorry I can't supply you with a photograph."

Stump's gaze rested on his stockings, loose breeches, Norfolk jacket and deerstalker cap.

"Damme," he grinned, "it's better than a pantomime. Second mate! Is there any more like you on the train? P'haps that chap in the next caboose, in a fur coat an' top hat, is the steward. An' wot'll Tagg say?"

"I don't know," said Dick, half inclined to resent this open scorn. "Who is Tagg, anyhow?"

Stump instantly became silent. He seemed to remember his "sailing orders." He muttered something about "playin' me for a sucker," and shut his lips obstinately. Not another word did he utter until they reached Dover. He smoked furiously, gave Royson many a wrathful glance, but bottled up the tumultuous thoughts which troubled him. On board the steamer, however, curiosity conquered prudence. After surveying Dick's unusual proportions from several points of

view, he came up and spoke in what he intended to be a light comedy tone.

"I say, Mr. Second Mate," he said, "I don't see the Plimsoll Mark on the funnel. Do you?"

"No, captain. I expect it has been washed off."

"If I was you I'd write to the Board of Trade about it."

"Best let sleeping dogs lie, captain."

"Why?"

"Because they might look for yours, and as it ought to be round your neck they would say you were unseaworthy."

"So you know what it is, you long swab?"

"Yes. Come and have a drink. That will reach your load-line all right."

Royson had hit on the right method of dealing with Stump. The skipper promised himself some fun, and they descended to the saloon. The Channel was in boisterous mood, and Dick staggered once or twice in transit. Stump missed none of this, and became more jovial. Thus might one of the Hereford stots he resembled approach a green pasture.

"If you ask the steward he'll bring you some belayin' tackle," he said.

"I am a trifle crank just now," admitted Royson, "but when the wind freshens I'll take in a reef or two."

Stump looked up at him.

"You've put me clean out of reckonin'. Never bin to sea, you say? Wot's yer name?"

"King, Richard King."

"Damme, I'm comin' to like you. You're a bit of a charak-ter. By the time the *Aphrodite* points her nose home again I'll 'ave you licked into shape."

They were crossing the saloon, and were sufficiently noteworthy by force of contrast to draw many eyes. Indeed, were Baron von Kerber on board, he must have been disagreeably impressed by the fact that in sending the short skipper and the long second mate of the *Aphrodite* to Marseilles in company he had supplied an unfailing means of tracking their movements. Of course, he was not responsible for the chance that threw them together, but the mere presence of two such men on the same vessel would be remembered quite easily by those who make it their business to watch trans-Channel passengers.

Royson gave no thought to this factor in the queer conditions then shaping his life. Had Stump remained taciturn, it might have occurred to him that they were courting observation. But it needed the exercise of much resourcefulness to withstand the stream of questions with which his commander sought to clear the mystery attached to a second mate who knew not the sea. Luckily, he emerged from the flood with credit; nay, the examiner himself was obliged at times to assume a knowledge which he did not possess, for, if Stump knew how to con a ship from port to port, Royson could give reasons for great circle sailing which left Stump gasping. At last, the stout captain could no longer conceal his amazement when Royson had

recited correctly the rules of the road for steamships crossing:

> If to my Starboard Red appear,
> It is my duty to keep clear;
> Act as judgment says is proper —
> "Port" — or "Starboard" — "Back" — or "Stop her!"
>
> But when upon my Port is seen
> A steamer's Starboard light of green,
> For me there's naught to do, but see
> That Green to Port keeps clear of me.

"Come, now," he growled, "wot's your game? D'ye mean to say you've bin humbuggin' me all this time?"

His little eyes glared redly from underneath his shaggy eyebrows. He was ready to sulk again, without hope of reconciliation, so Royson perforce explained.

"I have no objection to telling you, captain, how I came to acquire a good deal of unusual information about the sea, but I want to stipulate, once and for all, that I shall not be further questioned as to my past life."

"Go ahead! That's fair."

"Well, I have spent many a day, since I was a boy of ten until I was nearly twenty, sailing a schooner-rigged yacht on Windermere. My companion and tutor was a retired commander of the Royal Navy, and he amused himself by teaching me navigation. I learnt it better than any of the orthodox sciences I had to study at school. You see, that was my hobby, while a wholesome respect for my skipper led me to work hard. I have not forgotten what I was taught,

though the only stretch of water I have seen during the last few years is the Thames from its bridges, and I honestly believe that if you will put up with my want of experience of the sea for a week or so, I shall be quite capable of doing any work you may entrust to me."

"By gad!" said Stump admiringly, "you're a wonder. Come on deck. I'll give you a tip or two as we go into Calais."

During the journey across France it was natural that Royson should take the lead. He spoke the language fluently, whereas Stump's vocabulary was limited to a few forcible expressions he had picked up from brother mariners. There was a break-down on the line near Dijon, which delayed them eight hours, and Stump might have had apoplexy were not Royson at hand to translate the curt explanations of railway officials. But the two became good friends, which was an excellent thing for Dick, and the latter soon discovered, to his great surprise, that Stump had never set eyes on the *Aphrodite*.

"No," he said, when some chance remark from Royson had elicited this curious fact, "she's a stranger to me. Me an' Tagg — Tagg is my first mate, you see — had just left the *Chirria* when she was sold to the Germans out of the East Indian trade, an' we was lookin' about for wot might turn up when the man who chartered the *Aphrodite* put us on to this job. Tagg has gone ahead with most of the crew, but I had to stop in London a few days — to see after things a bit."

Stump had really remained behind in order to buy a complete set of charts, but he checked his confidences at that point, nor did Royson endeavor to probe further into the recent history of the yacht.

Instead of traversing Marseilles at night, they drove through its picturesque streets in broad daylight. Both Royson and the captain were delighted with the lines of the *Aphrodite* when they saw her in the spacious dock. Her tapering bows and rakish build gave her an appearance of greater size than her tonnage warranted. Royson was sailor enough to perceive that her masts and spars were intended for use, and, when he reached her deck, to which much scrubbing and vigorous holy-stoning had given the color of new bread, he knew that none but men trained on a warship had coiled each rope and polished every inch of shining brass.

And his heart sank a little then. The looks and carriage of the few sailors visible at the moment betokened their training. How could he hope to hold his own with them? The first day at sea must reveal his incompetence. He would be the laughing-stock of the crew.

He was almost nervous when an undersized hairy personage shoved a grinning face up a companionway, and hailed Stump joyfully. Then the captain did a thing which went far to prove that true gentility is not a matter of deportment or mincing phrase.

"Keep mum before this crowd," he muttered. "Stand by, and I'll pull you through."

Stump extended a gigantic hand to the hairy one. "Glad to see you again, old Never-fail," he roared. "Let me introjuice our second mate. Mr. Tagg — Mr. King. An' now, Tagg, wot's for breakfast? Mr. King an' me can eat a Frenchman if you have nothin' tastier aboard."

Royson was relieved to find that he had practically no duties to perform until the yacht sailed. She had been coaled and provisioned by a Marseilles firm of shipping agents, and only awaited telegraphic orders to get up steam, in case the wind were unfavorable for beating down the Gulf of Lions, when Mr. Fenshawe and his party arrived.

Every member of the crew was of British birth, and Britons are not, as a rule, endowed with the gift of tongues. Hence, Royson was the only man on board who spoke French, and this fact led directly to his active participation in the second act of the drama of love and death in which, all unconsciously, he was playing a leading part. On the day after his arrival in the French port, the head partner of the firm of local agents came on board and explained that, by inadvertence, some cases of claret of inferior vintage had been susbtituted for the wine ordered. The mistake had been discovered in the counting-house, and he was all apologies.

Royson and he chatted together while the goods were being exchanged, and, in the end, the polite Frenchman invited *messieurs les officiers* to dine with him, and visit the Palais de Glace, where some daring young lady

was announced to do things in a motor-car which, in England, are only attempted by motor omnibuses.

Stump, who would not leave the yacht, permitted Tagg and Royson to accept the proffered civility. They passed a pleasant evening, and saw the female acrobat negotiate a thirty-feet jump, head downward, taken through space by the automobile. Then they elected to walk to No. 3. Basin, a distance of a mile and a half. It was about eleven o'clock and a fine night. The docks road, a thoroughfare cut up by railway lines holding long rows of empty wagons, seemed to be quite deserted. Tagg, who was slightly lame, though active as a cat on board ship, was not able to walk fast. The two discussed the performance, and other matters of slight interest, and they paid little heed to the movements of half a dozen men, who appeared from behind some coal trucks, until the strangers advanced towards them in a furtive and threatening way. But nothing happened. The prowlers sheered off as quickly as they came. Tagg, who had the courage which Providence sends to puny men, glanced up at Royson and laughed.

"Your size saved us from a fight," he said. "That gang is up to mischief."

"I wonder what they are planning," said Royson, looking back to see if he could distinguish any other wayfarers on the ill-lighted road.

"Robbery, with murder thrown in," was Tagg's brief comment.

"They had the air of expecting somebody. Did you

think that? What do you say if we wait in the shadow a few minutes?"

"Better mind our own business," said Tagg, but he did not protest further, and the two halted in the gloom of a huge warehouse.

There was nothing visible along the straight vista of the road, but, after a few seconds' silence, they heard the clatter and rumble of a vehicle crossing a distant drawbridge.

"Some skipper comin' to his ship," muttered Tagg. "It can't be ours. By George, if those chaps tackled him they would be sorry for themselves."

"Captain Stump is a good man in a row, I take it?"

"'Good' isn't the word. He's a terror. I've seen him get six of his men out of a San Francisco crimp's house, an' I s'pose you 'aven't bin to sea without knowing wot that means."

"Ah!" said Royson admiringly. He had found safety many times during the past two days by some such brief comment. Thus did he steer clear of conversational rocks.

The carriage drew nearer, and became dimly visible — it was one of the tiny voiturettes peculiar to French towns. Suddenly the listeners heard a shout. The horse's feet ceased their regular beat on the roadway. Royson began to run, but Tagg vociferated:

"Wait for me, you long ijiot! If you turn up alone they'll knife you before you can say 'Jack Robinson.'"

Dick had no intention of saying "Jack Robinson," but he moderated his pace, and helped Tagg over the

ground by grasping his arm. They soon saw that two men had pulled the driver off the box, and were holding him down — indeed, tying him hand and foot. Royson prevented the success of this operation by a running kick and an upper cut which placed two Marseillais out of action. Then he essayed to plunge into a fearsome struggle that was going on inside the carriage. Frantic oaths in German and Italian lent peculiar significance to a flourishing of naked knives. But that which stirred the blood in his veins was his recognition of Baron von Kerber's high-pitched voice, alternately cursing and pleading for life to assailants who evidently meant to show scant mercy. One man who, out of the tail of his eye, had witnessed Dick's discomfiture of the coachman's captors, drew a revolver, a weapon not meant for show, as its six loaded chambers proved when Dick picked it up subsequently.

Royson had no love of unnecessary risk. Stooping quickly, he grasped the hub of the off front wheel, and, just varying the trick which saved Miss Fenshawe in Buckingham Palace Road, threw the small vehicle over on its side. No doubt the patient animal in the shafts wondered what was happening, but the five struggling men in the interior were even more surprised when they were pitched violently into the road.

Royson sprang into the midst of them, found von Kerber, and said:

"You're all right now, Baron. We can whip the heads off these rascals."

The sound of his English tongue seemed to take all

"Let your prisoner go, Mr. King" *Page 57*

the fight out of the remaining warriors. Tagg had closed valiantly with one, and the others made off. Von Kerber rose to his feet, so Royson went to Tagg's assistance. He heard the Baron shriek, in a falsetto of rage:

"You may have recovered the papyrus, Alfieri, but it is of no value to you. Name of an Italian dog! I have outwitted you even now!"

While kneeling to pinion the footpad's arms behind his back, thus rescuing Tagg from a professor of the savate, Dick tried to guess von Kerber's motive in hurling such an extraordinary taunt after one of his runaway adversaries, and in French, too, whereas the other had an Italian name, and, in all likelihood, spoke only Italian. Was this Alfieri the man who "hated" von Kerber — who "brought a very serious charge" against him? But Royson was given no time for consecutive thought. The Baron, breathing heavily, and seemingly in pain, came to him and said, in the low tone of one who does not wish to be overheard:

"Let your prisoner go, Mr. King. I am all right, and everlastingly obliged to you, but I do not wish to be detained in Marseilles while the slow French law gets to work. So let him go. He is nothing — a mere hireling, yes? And we sail to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV

VON KERBER EXPLAINS

"You've left your trademark on this chap," broke in Tagg. He was bending over a prostrate body, and the cab-driver was bewailing the plight of his voiturette.

Royson righted the carriage; then he lifted the man to a sitting position, and listened to his stertorous breathing. The blow had been delivered on that facial angle known to boxers as the "point," while its scientific sequel is the "knock-out."

"He is all right," was the cool verdict. "He will wake up soon and feel rather sick. The general effect will be excellent. In future he will have a wholesome respect for British sailors."

He laid the almost insensible form on the road again, pocketed the revolver, which he found close at hand, and gave an ear to von Kerber's settlement with the *cocher*. The latter was now volubly indignant in the assessment of damages to his vehicle, hoping to obtain a louis as compensation. When he was given a hundred francs his gratitude became almost incoherent.

The Baron cut him short, stipulating sternly that he must forget what had happened. Then he turned to Royson.

"If you think we can leave the fellow on the ground with safety, I want to reach the yacht," he said.

"Are you wounded?" inquired Dick.

"Slightly. Those scoundrels did not dare to strike home. They knew my papers would identify them."

"But they robbed you?"

"No, not of anything valuable. Why do you ask?"

"Because you sang out to one of them, an Italian, I should judge —"

"Ah, you heard that? You are, indeed, quick in an emergency. Can we go on, yes?"

"Certainly. I will just lift our dazed friend into the victoria, and tell the *cocher* to give him a glass of cognac at the first café he comes to."

This was done. Five minutes later, the first and second officers of the *Aphrodite* assisted their employer up the yacht's gangway. Leaving Tagg to explain to Stump what had happened, Royson took von Kerber to his cabin, and helped to remove his outer clothing. A superficial wound on the neck, and a somewhat deeper cut on the right forearm, were the only injuries; the contents of a medicine chest, applied under von Kerber's directions, soon staunched the flow of blood.

"I do not wish anything to be said about this affair," began the Baron, when Royson would have left him.

"Tagg must have given the captain full details already," said Dick.

"But did he hear that name, Alfieri?"

"I think not."

"And he would not understand about the — er — document?"

"The papyrus," suggested Royson.

"Yes."

"No. I don't suppose he would understand the word in English, whereas you spoke French."

"Ah, yes, of course. Well, that is between you and me. Will you ask Captain Stump and Mr. Tagg to join us in a bottle of wine? I would put matters in my own way, yes?"

The Baron, after a slight hesitancy, made his wishes clear. Mr. Fenshawe and his party would arrive at Marseilles by the *train de luxe* next morning, and preparations must be made for instant departure as soon as they came on board. They would be alarmed needlessly if told of the affray on the quay, so it was advisable that nothing should be said about it.

"You see," purred the Baron affably, refilling the glasses which Stump and Tagg had emptied at a gulp, "ladies, especially young ones, are apt to be nervous."

"Have we wimmen aboard this trip?" growled Stump in a deep rumble of disapproval.

"Ladies, yes. Two, and a maid."

Stump bore round on his chief.

"Wot did I tell ye, Tagg?" he demanded fiercely. "Didn't I say that them fixins aft meant no good?"

"You did," agreed Tagg, with equal asperity.

Von Kerber caught the laughter in Dick's eyes, and checked the angry protest ready to bubble forth.

"The two ladies," he said, speaking with an emphasis

which strove to cloak his annoyance at Stump's off-handed manner, "are Miss Fenshawe, granddaughter of the gentleman who owns this yacht, and her companion, Mrs. Haxton. Without their presence this trip would not have been undertaken, and that fact had better be recognized at the outset. But now, gentlemen, I have come on ahead to have a quiet talk with you. Captain Stump knows our destination, but none of you is aware of the object of our voyage. I propose to take you fully into my confidence in that respect. By this time, you have become more or less acquainted with the crew, and, if you think any of the men are unsuitable, we must get rid of them at once."

He paused, and looked at Stump. That broad-beamed navigator emptied his glass again, and gazed into it fixedly, apparently wondering why champagne was so volatile a thing. Tagg followed the skipper's example, but fixed his eyes on the bottle, perhaps in calculation. Royson, deeming it wise to hold his tongue, contented himself with closing the medicine chest, and thus making it possible for von Kerber to sit down.

The latter was obviously ill at ease. Although he was the master of these three men, he was their inferior in individual strength of character. But he was a polished man of the world, and he promptly extricated himself from a difficult position, though Royson, at least, detected the effort he was compelled to make.

"I see you are thinking that one bottle does not go far among four of us, Mr. Tagg," he exclaimed, with a

pleasantly patronizing air. "Kindly tell the steward to bring another, Mr. King. And some cigars. Then we can discuss matters at our ease. And will you make sure that we are not overheard? What I have to say is meant for the ship's officers alone at this moment, though, when the time for action comes, every man on board must be with us absolutely."

Dick summoned the steward, and ascertained that the watch were quietly chatting and smoking forward, whereas the Baron's stateroom was situated aft. The delay enabled von Kerber to collect his thoughts. When he resumed the promised disclosure, his voice was under control, and he spoke with less constraint.

"It is probable that you gentlemen are not familiar with the history of Egypt," he said, "but you may take it from me that the facts I now lay before you are accurate. At one time, about the beginning of the Christian era, the Romans were all-powerful in the Nile delta. They pushed their stations a long way south, almost to the borders of Abyssinia, but it is important to remember that they followed the lines of the river, not the sea. In the year 24 B.C., the Roman Governor, hearing of the great wealth of a people called the Sabæans, whose country lay in Arabia, in the hinterland of Mocha and Aden, sent an expedition there under the command of Ælius Gallus. This legion is historically reported to have met with reverses. That is true, in the sense that its galleys were beset by a terrible storm on the return voyage. Though the Red Sea is usually a fair-weather lake,

you can have a stiff blow there at times, I believe, Captain Stump?"

Thus appealed to, Stump had to open his mouth.

"I've known it blow like sin," he said. "Isn't that so, Tagg?"

"Wuss nor sin, cap'n. Ord'nary manslaughter isn't in it with a nor'-east gale on a dark night off them islands north o' Perim."

"Exactly," agreed the Baron eagerly. "That is where the Roman triremes were caught. They were driven ashore in a little bay in what is now Italian territory. Their vessels were wrecked, but they saved the loot they had taken from the Sabæans. The nature and value of that loss can hardly be estimated in these days, but you can draw your own conclusions when you learn that the city of Saba is more familiar to us under its Biblical name, Sheba. It was thence that the famous queen came who visited Solomon. Nearly a thousand years later, when the Roman legion sacked it with fire and sword, it was at the height of its glory."

Von Kerber, fairly launched in a recital glib on his lips, regained the dominance of manner which the attitude of his subordinates had momentarily imperiled. Increased composure brought with it a certain hauteur, and he paused again — perhaps to gratify the actor's instinct in him rather than observe the effect of his words. But the break was unfortunate. Tagg removed the cigar he was half chewing, half smoking, and said oracularly:

"The Queen o' Sheba! I once knew a ship o' that name. D'ye remember her, cap'n?"

"Shall I ever forgit 'er?" grunted Stump. "I wish them Romans had looted *her*. W'en I was goin' down the Hooghly, she was comin' up, in tow. Her rope snapped at the wrong moment, an' she ran me on top of the James an' Mary shoal. Remember 'er, damn 'er!"

The Austrian winced at this check to his story. These stolid mariners had no imagination. He wished to enthuse them, to fire them with the vision of countless wealth, but they had side-tracked ideality for some stupid reminiscence of a collision. In a word, they did him good, and he reached the point of his narration all the more speedily.

"As I was saying," he broke in rapidly, "the expedition met with disaster by sea. It was equally unfortunate on land. The commander built a small encampment, and sent for assistance the only seaworthy vessel left to him. He waited six months, but no help came. Then he determined to march inland — to strike a bold course for the Nile — but he was soon compelled to entrench himself against the attacks of hostile tribes. The probability is that the Sabæans had interests on the western shores of the Red Sea as well as in Arabia. Indeed, the Abyssinians hold the belief to this day that their kings are descended from a son of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. However that may be, Ælius Gallus buried his treasure, threw aside all useless impediments, and, like the

daring soldier he was, decided in favor of attack. He fought his way for twenty marches, but was finally overthrown, with all his men, by a Nubian clan. The Romans were slain without mercy. Their conquerors knew nothing of the gold and jewels hidden in the desert three hundred miles distant, and that marvelous hoard, gathered from Persia and India by generations of traders, has lain there for nearly two thousand years."

This time he was sure he had riveted the attention of his hearers. They would have been dull, indeed, if their wits were not stirred by the possibilities underlying that last sentence. Royson, of course, jumped to conclusions which the others were slow to reach. But Stump was not backward in summing up the facts in his own way.

"Am I right in supposin' that you know where this stuff is hid, Mr. von Kerber?" he asked, his small eyes twinkling under the strain of continuous thought.

"Yes."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes."

"Does anybody else know?"

Royson felt that the Baron did not expect this question, but the answer came promptly:

"Mr. Fenshawe knows, and the two ladies who accompany him have a species of general knowledge."

"If I took c'rect bearin's, accordin' to your yarn the cargo is planted some distance from the coast?"

"About forty miles."

"An', while some of us goes after it, the yacht will stand off an' on, waitin' orders, an' mebbe runnin' to Perim or Aden for letters."

"You have grasped the situation exactly, Captain Stump."

The skipper shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to another.

"Sink me," he growled, "I thought it couldn't be gun-runnin' when there was wimmin mixed up in it. Didn't I say so, Tagg?"

"You did," agreed Tagg again.

"Gun-running!" repeated von Kerber. "You mean carrying contraband arms, yes? What put that into your head?"

"I've not bin cap'n of a ship nigh on fifteen years without larnin' the importance of knowin' wot she's loaded with," said Stump. "Big or little, in package or bulk, I go through her manifest, an' check it, too."

The Baron laughed softly. He was pale, probably as the result of his wounds, but he was inflexible in his resolve to arrive at an understanding with his lieutenants before the remaining passengers put in an appearance.

"*Ganz gut, herr capitan!*" he cried. "You must have seen our supply of firearms and cartridges, yes?"

"Twenty rifles, twenty-five revolvers, an' enough ammunition to fight a small war." Stump ticked off each item slowly and looked at Tagg as though he expected him to cry "Tally!"

"Ah! That is well put, yes? If we are called on to

fight a small war, as you say, have we got the right sort of men on board? I had to trust to chance. It was the only way. I could not talk plainly in England, you see."

"I don't know much about 'em," said Stump. "I can answer for myself an' Tagg, an' from wot I hear, Mr. King has a heart of the right size. As for the others, I'll run the rule over 'em between here an' Port Said. If I have any doubts about one or two, we can ship 'em home on a P. an' O. But, from the cut of their jibs, most of 'em are deserters from the Royal Navy, an' the remainder are army reserve men. That sort of crowd is pretty tough, eh, Tagg?"

"Tough!" echoed Tagg. "If they're 'lowed to eat three solid meals every day like the Lord Mayor's banquets they've put out o' sight since they kem aboard, there'll be no holdin' 'em."

"Oh, yes, there will. *I'll* hold 'em," said Stump.

"And you approve of my reticence thus far?" asked the Baron.

"Of your wot, mister?"

"I mean that it was wise not to tell them the object of the voyage."

"Take my advice an' tell 'em nothin'. Wait till they're frizzlin' in the Red Sea, an' I've worked some of the grease out of 'em. By that time, wot between prickly heat an' high livin', they'll be ready to kill any Gord's quantity of I-talians."

"Italians!" snapped von Kerber irritably, "Why do you speak of Italians?"

"It's your fairy-tale, mister, not mine. You said that wot's 'is name, the Roman who went through the Shebeens, had planted his takin's in I-talian territory."

"Ah!" The Austrian gasped a little, and his pallor increased. "That is of no consequence — the place — is a desert — we shall meet with no interference."

Then Royson spoke. Hitherto, he had taken no share in the conversation, but he saw that von Kerber was unable to withstand any further strain. The man was bearing up gallantly, yet he had reached the limit of endurance, and the trouble, whatever it was, seemed to be wearing his very soul.

"Neither Captain Stump nor Mr. Tagg knows that you are wounded, sir," said Dick. "Perhaps it would be advisable to defer our talk until the morning."

Von Kerber shaded his face with his hands.

"I cannot add much to what I have said already," he answered. "I think you understand me. I want silence — and good service. Give me these and I shall repay you tenfold."

They went on deck. Stump dug Royson in the ribs.

"It would ha' done me a treat to see you upper cut that Frog," he whispered, his mouth widening in a grin. "I'm good at a straight punch myself, but I'm too short for a swing. Lord love a duck, I wish I'd bin there."

So the burly skipper of the *Aphrodite* paid slight heed to the wonders half revealed by von Kerber's story. He had been stirred but for a moment when the project was laid bare. Already his mind was rejecting

it. The only matter that concerned him was to bring his ship to her destination in a seaman-like manner, and let who would perplex their brains with fantasy. Indeed, he was beginning to regard the Baron as a harmless lunatic, whom Providence had entrusted with the spending of a rich man's money for the special benefit of the seafaring community.

"A straight punch!" he repeated, gazing with a species of solemn joy at the men leaning against the rails forward. "They're a hard-bitten lot from wot I've seen of 'em, an' they'll have to have it before they're at sea with me very long. Won't they, Tagg?"

"They will," said Tagg, eying the unconscious watch with equal fixity.

Dick went to his cabin firm in the belief that he would lie awake half the night. But his brain soon refused to bother itself with problems which time might solve in a manner not yet conceivable, and he slept soundly until he was roused at an early hour. Day dawned bright and clear. A pleasant northwesterly breeze swept the smoke haze from off the town and kissed the blue waters of the land-locked harbor into white-crested wavelets. He took the morning watch, from four o'clock until eight, and all he had to do was to make sure that the men tried to whiten decks already spotless, and cleaned brass which shone in the sun the instant that luminary peeped over the shoulder of Nôtre Dame de la Garde. Although the *Aphrodite* lay inside the mole, her bridge and promenade deck were high enough to permit him to see the rocky islet

crowned by the Château d'If. He knew that the hero of Dumas' masterpiece had burrowed a tunnel out of that grim prison, to swim ashore an outcast, a man with a price on his head, yet bearing with him the precious paper whose secret should make him the fabulously rich Count of Monte Christo. It was only a soul-stirring romance, a dim legend transformed into vivid life by the genius of the inspired quadroon. But its extraordinary appositeness to the *Aphrodite's* quest suddenly occurred to the young Englishman watching the sunlit isle. He was startled at the thought, especially when he contrasted his present condition with his depressed awakening in Brixton five days earlier. Then he laughed, and a sailor, busily engaged in polishing the glass front of the wheel-house, followed the direction of his gaze and half interpreted his day-dream.

"It's a bit of a change from the West India Dock Road, ain't it, sir?" he asked.

Royson agreed with him, and the two conversed a while, but when the man led the chat round to the probable destination of the yacht, the second mate's thoughts fell from romance to reality.

"You will be told soon enough where we're bound for," he answered sharply.

"I'm sorry, sir, if I've said anything I shouldn't," said the other. "But the chaps forrard made out that there's a bit of a mystery in it, an' I argied they was talkin' nonsense."

"You were quite right. The owner and a party of

ladies will oe on board to-day, and then you will find out our destination."

"Ladies, you say, sir? That settles it. This is no Riff pirates job, then?"

Royson turned on his heel. So others, as well as Captain Stump, had drawn conclusions from those boxes of arms and ammunition? If Baron Franz von Kerber deemed it necessary to provide a warlike equipment, how could he permit an elderly gentleman like Mr. Fenshawe, and a charming girl like Irene, to say nothing of others yet unknown to Royson, to share in the risk of a venture demanding such safeguards? That was a puzzle, but it disturbed Dick not a whit. Somehow, the mention of the desert and its secret hoard had stirred him strangely. It seemed to touch unknown springs in his being. He felt the call of the far-flung solitude, and his heart was glad that fortune had bound up his lot with that of the winsome woman who smiled on him so graciously when they parted in Hyde Park.

Then a steward announced breakfast, and the mirage vanished. Captain Stump's greeting showed that his slumbers had not been disturbed by golden visions.

"Mornin'," he said. "I've just bin tellin' Tagg." Seeing that his second officer was not enlightened by this remark he went on:

"You'll want his help if I'm not alongside. Bless your 'eart, you can depend on Tagg. He'll never give you away. He thinks the world of you already."

The reminder was useful, though not in the sense intended by Stump. It brought Royson back to earth. He felt that he must justify himself if he would win his way among these rough sea-dogs. Hence, when a railway omnibus lumbered along the quay, and pulled up in front of the yacht's gangway, he remembered that he was Mr. King, probationary second mate on a small vessel, and not Richard Royson, heir to a baronetcy and rightful successor to an estate with a rent-roll of five thousand a year.

Mr. Fenshawe, exceedingly alert for one of his age, helped two ladies to alight. The first was Irene. Her admiring glance at the *Aphrodite*, no less than an exclamation of delighted interest, revealed that she, too, like everyone else, was a stranger to the ship. She was followed by a pretty woman, whose clothes and furs were of a fashion which told even a mere man that she was a person of consequence. This was Mrs. Haxton, and her first action caused Dick to dislike her, because she deliberately turned her back on the smart yacht, and gave heed only to the safe lowering of certain trunks from the roof of the omnibus. He heard the manner of her speech to a neatly dressed maid and its languid insolence did not help to dissipate that unfavorable impression.

Miss Fenshawe ran along the gangway. Royson had stationed a sailor at the shoreward end, while he held the rail to steady it on deck.

"Good morning, Mr. King," she cried. "Has not Baron von Kerber arrived?"

"Good morning, Mr. King," she cried *Page* 72

"Yes," he said. "He came aboard late last night."

"Then why is he not here to meet us?"

"I believe he is fatigued after the long journey, Miss Fenshawe."

"Fatigued! Fiddlesticks! Look at my grandfather. Is he fatigued? And we have traveled over the same route. But I will deal with the lie-abed Baron when I see him. What a nice boat the *Aphrodite* is. I am in love with her already. And is that Captain Stump? Good morning, captain. I have heard about you. Baron von Kerber says you will bite my head off if I come on the bridge. Is that true?"

"Shows how little Mr. von Kerber reely knows about me, ma'am," said Stump gallantly, beaming on her over the rail of the small upper deck.

By this time, Mrs. Haxton had satisfied herself that the *Aphrodite's* crew might be trusted to bring her boxes on board without smashing them, and she gathered her skirts carefully to keep them clear of the quay. She raised a lorgnon, mounted on a tortoise-shell and silver handle, and examined the yacht with measured glance. She honored the stalwart second officer with a prolonged stare.

"Is that the captain?" she said to Mr. Fenshawe, who was waiting to escort her on board.

"No. That is Mr. King, the young man Irene told you about."

"Oh, indeed! Rather an Apollo Belvidere, don't you think?"

"He seems to be a nice young fellow, quite well-

mannered, and that sort of thing. And it imposes somewhat of a strain on the imagination to picture him in the scant attire popular at Delphi."

Mr. Fenshawe was not without a dry humor, but Mrs. Haxton was pleased to be amused.

"What a light-hearted creature you are!" she cried. "I envy you your high spirits. Personally, I feel utterly downcast at the prospect of a sea voyage. It always blows a mistral, or some other horrid thing, when I cross the Mediterranean. Are you sure that little bridge won't move the instant I step on it? I have quite an aversion to such jim-crack appliances."

Mrs. Haxton's timidity did not prevent her from noting the arrival of a telegraph messenger on a bicycle. He was reading the name of the yacht when she said:

"Come here, boy. Have you a telegram for me?"

She used excellent French, and the messenger handed her the small blue envelope he was carrying. The lady dropped her eyeglasses, and scanned the address quickly before she read it aloud.

"Richard Royson, British Yacht *Aphrodite*, Marseilles," she announced, after a moment's pause.

"Who is Richard Royson?" she went on, looking from Mr. Fenshawe to the nearest officer of the ship, who happened to be Royson himself.

The incident was so unexpected that Dick reddened and hesitated. Yet he saw no reason why he should not proclaim himself.

"That message is meant for me, madam," he said.

"For you? But Mr. Fenshawe has just said that your name is King?"

"Baron von Kerber bestowed that name on me, but he acted under a misapprehension. My name is Royson."

"How odd! How excessively odd!"

Mrs. Haxton seemed to forget her fear of the gangway. Advancing with sure and easy tread she gave Dick his telegram. And he was conscious, during one unhappy minute, that Irene, and Captain Stump, and Mr. Fenshawe, each in varying degree, shared Mrs. Haxton's opinion as to the exceeding oddity of the fact that any one should be masquerading on board the *Aphrodite* under an assumed name.

CHAPTER V

MISS FENSHAWE SEEKS AN ALLY

ROYSON was not in the least nonplussed by this recurrence of a dilemma for which he was not responsible. Von Kerber, of course, could have extricated him with a word, but von Kerber, for reasons of his own, remained invisible. So Dick threw his head back in a characteristic way which people soon learnt to associate with a stubborn resolve to see a crisis through to the end. He ignored Mrs. Haxton, and spoke to the captain.

"I am glad the question of my right name has been raised," he said. "When Baron von Kerber comes on deck I shall ask him to settle the matter once and for all."

"Just so," said Stump, "I would if I was you."

"The really important thing is the whereabouts of our cabins," interrupted Mrs. Haxton's clear drawl.

"Take the ladies aft, — Mr. Royson, — an' let 'em choose their quarters," directed Stump curtly.

Dick would have obeyed in silence had not Miss Fenshawe thought fit to help him. She had found Mrs. Haxton's airs somewhat tiresome during the long journey from London, and she saw no reason why

that lady should be so ready to bring a hornet's nest about Royson's ears.

"We are not in such a desperate hurry to bestow our belongings that you cannot read your telegram," she said to Dick. Then she favored Stump with a frank smile. "I know you mean to start almost immediately, captain, and it is possible that Mr. Royson may wish to send an answer before we leave Marseilles. You won't be angry if he waits one moment before he shows us to our staterooms?"

"Not at all, miss," said the skipper, "he's at your service. I can do without him — easy."

Stump was angry with Dick, and did not hesitate to show it. A blunt man, of plain speech, he resented anything in the nature of double-dealing. Royson's remarkable proficiency in most matters bearing on the navigation of a ship had amazed him in the first instance, and this juggling with names led him to suspect some deep-laid villainy with which the midnight attack on von Kerber was not wholly unconnected.

But the person most taken aback by Irene's self-assertion was Mrs. Haxton. A firm attitude on the girl's part came as an unpleasing novelty. An imperious light leaped to her eyes, but she checked the words which might have changed a trivial incident into a sharp tussle for supremacy.

"I am sorry," she said quietly. "Telegrams are important things, sometimes. And the messenger is waiting, too."

Thus, under the fire of many eyes, Royson tore open

the *petit bleu*, and read its typewritten contents. The words were brief, but sufficiently bewildering:

"Better return to England forthwith. I undertake full responsibility for advice, and guarantee you against loss. Forbes."

"Forbes," undoubtedly, was his uncle's solicitor. But how was it possible that he should have discovered the name of the yacht and her port of departure? And why did he, a methodical old lawyer, not only disobey his client's strict injunctions that no help or assistance of any sort was to be given to a rebellious nephew, but ignore Dick's own wishes, and address him as Royson, not as King?

There were twenty questions which might be asked, but staring at the flimsy bit of paper, with its jerky lettering, would not answer any of them. And the issue called for instant decision. Already, in obedience to a signal from Stump, men were standing by the fixed capstans on the mole ready to cast off the yacht's hawsers. Perhaps Sir Henry Royson was dying? Even in that unlikely event, of what avail was a title with nothing a year? Certainly, the solicitor's cautious telegram might be construed into an offer of financial aid. That reading implied a more cheerful view than he had taken hitherto of his prospects with regard to the Cuddesham estate. Yet, the only way in which he could meet Mr. Forbes's wishes was to spring ashore then and there, if such a proceeding were practicable, and abandon the adventure whose strange by-ways were already opening up before his mind's eye.

Then Irene said sympathetically:

"I hope you have not received any bad news, Mr. — Royson."

The captain's pause before addressing him by his real name was intended to be ironical. Not so the girl's hesitancy. Interpreting Dick's mood with her woman's intuition, she felt that he wished to drop any subterfuge now, no matter what his motive might have been in adopting one hitherto.

Her voice broke the spell which the telegram, with its curious phrasing, had cast on him.

"No, Miss Fenshawe, not bad news, certainly. Indeed, it was the absence of any sort of news that troubled me for a moment. *Chasseur!*"

"*Oui, m'sieu'*," and the messenger raised his hat.

"*Voila!*" Dick threw him a franc. "*Il n'a pas de reponse.*"

"*Merci bien, m'sieu'.*"

That spinning of a coin through the air showed that Royson had made up his mind. He had tossed with Fortune, and cared not who won.

The messenger drew away from the gangway, and entered into a conversation with the driver of the omnibus. Stump nodded to a man on the quay. The forward mooring rope was cleared, and fell into the water with a loud splash. Two sailors ran the gangway on board. An electric bell jarred in the engine-room, and the screw revolved, while the rattle of the steering chains showed that the helm was put hard a-port. When the *Aphrodite* moved slowly astern, her

bow swung towards the mouth of the dock. The indicator rang again, twice, and the yacht, after a pause, began to forge ahead. Another splash, and the second hawser was cast loose. The mole, the neighboring ships, the landward quays and the warehouses thereon, seemed to diminish in size without any perceptible cause, and, in a space of time that might have been measured by seconds rather than minutes, the *Aphrodite* was throbbing southward.

Mrs. Haxton, whose eagerness to inspect her stateroom had gone, was hailed pleasantly by Irene.

"Now, because I asked you to wait, you shall have first choice," she said. "Lead on, Mr. Royson. Let us see our dens."

But Baron von Kerber came running along the deck, all smiles and welcoming words, and it was evident that some reason other than physical unfitness had kept him out of sight until the yacht's voyage was actually commenced. Dick heard him explaining coolly that he had met with a slight accident on arriving at Marseilles overnight. Some difficulty in dressing, he said, combined with the phenomenal punctuality of the *train de luxe*, accounted for his tardy appearance, but the ladies would find that the steward had everything in readiness, and Mr. Fenshawe was too experienced a *voyageur* not to make himself at home instantly. Rattling on thus agreeably, he led the way aft.

In the midst of his explanations, he saw that Dick

was accompanying the party, and told him, rather abruptly, that his services were not required. In no amiable mood, therefore, the second officer went to the upper deck, where the skipper was growling his views to Tagg about the mysterious incident of the telegram. It was a moment of tension, and something might have been said that would tend to place Royson and the captain at arm's length if the *Aphrodite* had not taken it into her head to emulate Miss Fenshawe's action by coming to Dick's assistance. The little vessel remembered that which Stump paid small heed to, and asserted herself.

Notwithstanding her half-deck saloon, with the tiny chart-house perched thereon, and the narrow bridge that gave her a steamer-like aspect, she was rigged as a topsail schooner, her sharp lines and consequent extra length affording full play to her fore-and-aft sails. Her first owner had designed her with set purpose. It was his hobby to remain in out-of-the-way parts of the world for years at a time, visiting savage lands where coal was not procurable, and he trusted more to sails than to engine-power. But Stump, and his chief officer, and nearly every sailor on board, being accustomed to steam, despised wind-jammers, and pinned their faith to the engines.

With a favorable wind such as was blowing at the moment, or to steady the yacht in a cross sea, the captain would have set a foresail and jib. To help the propeller was good seamanship, but to bank the engine-room fires and depend wholly on sails was the

last thing he would think of. Hence, the *Aphrodite* straightway taught him a sharp lesson. While Stump was ruminating on the exact form of some scathing remark for Royson's benefit, a sudden stoppage of the screw, and an ominously easy roll over the crest of the next sea, showed that the engines were idle.

Stump hurled a lurid question down the speaking-tube. The engineer's equally emphatic reply told him that there was a breakdown, cause not stated. Now, the outer roadstead of Marseilles harbor is one of the most awkward places in the Mediterranean for a disabled vessel. Though the Gulf of Lions is almost tideless, it has strong and treacherous currents. The configuration of the rocky coast, guarded as it is by small islands and sunken reefs, does not allow much seaway until a lighthouse, some miles distant from the mainland, is passed. Stump, of course, would have made use of the ship's sails before she drifted into peril. But he was purple with wrath, and the necessary commands were not familiar to his tongue.

Therefore, he hesitated, though he was far from remaining silent, and Royson, never at a loss when rapidity of thought and action was demanded, took the lead. He woke up the crew with a string of orders, rushed from foremast to mainmast and back to the bows again to see that the men hauled the right ropes and set the sails in the right way, and had the *Aphrodite* bowling along under canvas in less than two minutes after the stopping of the screw. Not until every sheet was drawing and the yacht running free did it occur

to him that he had dared to assume unto himself the captain's prerogative.

Rather red-faced and breathless, not only from his own exertions but by reason of the disconcerting notion which possessed him, he raced up the short companion-ladder leading from the fore deck to the bridge. Stump seemed to be awaiting him with a halter.

"I hope I did right, sir, in jumping in like that," gasped Dick. "I thought it best to get steering way on the yacht without delay, and —"

"Wot's yer name now?" roared Stump, glowering at him in a manner which led Dick to believe he had committed an unpardonable offense.

"Still the same, sir — Royson."

"I thought p'raps it might ha' bin Smith, as you're such a lightnin' change artist. Just bung in to the engine-room, will you, an' find out wot that son of a gun below there is a-doing of?"

"I will go if you like, sir, but I know nothing about engines."

"Take charge here, then. Keep her steady as she goes. You've a clear course half a mile to westward of that light."

Stump disappeared, and Royson found himself entrusted with full charge of the vessel ere she had been ten minutes at sea. His gruff commander could have paid him no greater compliment.

In the engineer, a man from West Hartlepool, the captain met one who spoke the vernacular.

"It's no good a-dammin' me because there's a flaw

in a connectin' rod," he protested, when Stump's strenuous questioning allowed him to explain matters. "I can't see inside a piece of crimson steel any more'n you can."

"None of your lip, my lad, or I'll find flaws all over you, P. D. Q. Can you fix this mess at sea, or must we put back?"

The engineer quailed under Stump's bovine eye.

"It would be better to put back, sir. I may be able to manage, but it's doubtful."

Stump went aft to consult von Kerber. So speedily had the yacht's mishap been dealt with that no member of the saloon party was aware of it, though any sailor among them would have recognized instantly that the vessel was traveling under canvas. The Baron, when he heard what had taken place, was most emphatic in vetoing the suggestion that the *Aphrodite* should return to Marseilles, and Stump was equally determined not to sail through the Straits of Bonifacio in half a gale of wind. As a compromise, a course was shaped for Toulon, and that port was made during the afternoon. It was the wisest thing to do, under the circumstances. Toulon is the French naval base for the Mediterranean, and her marine *chantiers* not only repaired the engines in a few hours, but supplied a set of spare parts, a wise precaution in view of the yacht's probable sojourn in a locality where castings would be unattainable.

Thenceforth the voyage proceeded smoothly. Royson took the first opportunity of explaining to von Kerber how and why the mistake as to his name had

arisen, and the Baron only smiled, in his superior way, having recovered his somewhat domineering manner from the hour that the French coast-line sank beneath the horizon.

Stump soon ascertained that the *Aphrodite* made better weather and faster running as a schooner than as a steamship when the wind suited, and Royson's position on board was rendered all the more secure thereby. For the rest, Dick lived the humdrum life of the ship. Naturally, he saw a good deal of the occupants of the saloon, but the acquaintance did not progress beyond formalities. The two ladies read, and walked, and played bridge with Mr. Fenshawe and the Baron. They took much interest in Stromboli and the picturesque passage through the Straits of Messina, and the red glare of Etna kept them on deck for hours. Then the yacht settled down for the run to Port Said, and arrived at that sunlit abode of rascality on the first of November.

Here the stores and coal bunkers were replenished, but no member of the crew was allowed to land. Cablegrams, letters, and newspapers came in bundles for the cabin-folk. The only communication of any sort for officers or men was a letter addressed to Royson by name. Von Kerber constituted himself postman, and he brought the missive to Dick in person, but not until the *Aphrodite* had entered the canal after shipping her French pilot and search-light.

He was annoyed, though he veiled his ill-humor under an affected carelessness.

"How came you to give Port Said as a port of call to one of your correspondents?" he asked.

"I did not," said Dick, whose surprise was genuine enough to disarm suspicion.

"Then some one has made a very accurate guess, yes?" sneered the other.

"I expected no letter from any person under the sun, and I certainly told no one I was passing through Port Said, for the sufficient reason that I never even thought of the place until you informed me yourself, sir, that we were bound for the Red Sea."

"It is strange. Well, here is your letter. Perhaps, when you have read it, you may understand how the thing has happened. I wished our destination to remain hidden from the general public, and you are the only man on board, except Mr. Fenshawe and myself, whose whereabouts are known in London."

Now it chanced that the postmark was illegible, and, furthermore, that von Kerber had already read the letter by adopting the ingenious plan of the Russian censor, who grips the interior sheet in an instrument resembling a long, narrow curling-tongs, and twists steadily until he is able to withdraw it uninjured. But Stiff legal note-paper is apt to bear signs of such treatment. Somewhat later in the day, Royson saw these things, and was perplexed. At the moment, he merely broke open the envelope.

It was a brief communication from Mr. Forbes.

"I telegraphed to you at Marseilles," it said, "and have ascertained that my message was delivered to you.

I regret your apparent decision not to fall in with my request. Sir Henry Royson is ill, almost dangerously so, and I have reason to believe that he wishes to make amends to you for his past attitude. I received your letter, wherein you stated that you were shipping on some vessel under the name of King, but I had little difficulty in tracing you to Mr. Fenshawe's yacht, and I do not feel justified in recognizing your unnecessary alias. Again, I advise you to return. I am sure that your employer, a most estimable man, will not place any difficulties in your way. If you leave the *Aphrodite* at Port Said or Ismalia, and send me a cablegram, I will remit by cable funds sufficient for your needs."

Dick had deemed this disturbing problem dead and done with. He had not hesitated at Marseilles, nor was he less decided now. He held out the letter to von Kerber frankly, little thinking how close a scrutiny had been given to his face while he was learning its contents.

"Read it," he said, "and you will see for yourself that I am in no way responsible."

Von Kerber seemed to be taken aback by this display of confidence.

"No, no," he said loftily. "I do not wish it. I have your word. That is sufficient."

"May I send an answer?"

"Yes, from Suez."

And the incident might have ended there had it not been brought into sharp prominence that evening. Mr. Tagg took the first watch, from eight o'clock to

midnight. Under ordinary conditions, Royson, who was free until four in the morning, would have gone to his cabin and slept soundly. But, like many another who passes through the great canal for the first time, he could not resist the fascination of the ship's noiseless, almost stealthy, passage through the desert.

After supper, while enjoying a pipe before turning in, he went forward and stood behind the powerful electric lamp fitted in the bows to illumine the narrow water-lane which joins East and West. The broad shaft of light lent a solemn beauty to the bleak wastes on either hand. In front, the canal's silvery riband shimmered in magic life. Its nearer ripples formed a glittering corsage for the ship's tapered stem, and merged into a witches' way of blackness beyond. The red signal of a distant *gare*, or station, or the white gleam of an approaching vessel's masthead light, shone from the void like low-pitched stars. Overhead the sky was of deepest blue, its stupendous arch studded with stars of extraordinary radiance, while low on the west could be seen the paler sheen of departing day. At times his wondering eyes fell on some Arab encampment on the neighboring bank, where shrouded figures sat round a fire, and ghostly camels in the background raised ungainly heads and gazed at the ever-mysterious sight of the moving ship.

The marvelous scene was at once intimate and remote. Its distinguishable features had the sense of nearness and actuality of some piece of splendid stage-craft, yet he seemed to be peering not at the rigid out-

lines of time but rather into the vague, almost terrifying, depths of eternity. And it was a bewildering fact that this glimpse into the portals of the desert was no new thing to him. Though never before had his mortal eyes rested on the far-flung vista, he absorbed its soothing glamour with all the zest of one who came back to a familiar horizon after long sojourn in pent streets and tree-shrouded valleys.

Time and again he strove to shake off this eerie feeling, but it was not to be repelled. He fought against its dominance, and denounced its folly, yet his heart whispered that he was not mistaken, that the majestic silence conveyed some thrilling message which he could not understand. How long he stood there, and how utterly he had yielded to the strange prepossession of his dream, he scarce realized until he heard a soft voice close behind him.

"Is that you, Mr. Royson?" it said, and he was called back from the unknown to find Miss Fenshawe standing near.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I was — so taken up with this — to me — most entrancing experience —"

"That you did not hear my fairy footsteps," she broke in, with a quiet laugh. "Do not apologize for that. I am wearing list slippers, so my ghostlike approach is easily accounted for. And I am really very greatly relieved at having found you at all. I was afraid you had left the ship without my knowledge."

"But how could that be possible, Miss Fenshawe?"

he asked, startled out of his reverie by her peculiar phrase.

"Please don't speak so loudly," she said, dropping her voice almost to a whisper. "I have been looking for you during the past half hour. I came here twice, but you were so wrapped up in shadow that I failed to see you, and I was becoming quite anxious, because one of the men assured me you were not in your cabin."

Dick caught a flurried note in her utterance, a strained desire to avoid the semblance of that anxiety which she had just admitted. It puzzled him quite as much as the curious sense of familiarity with his surroundings, a sense which the girl's unexpected appearance had by no means dispelled. And he was oddly conscious of a breaking away of the social barrier of whose existence she, at least, must have been convinced. The mere whispering together in this lonely part of the ship might account for it, to some extent, so he braced himself for the effort to restore her self-control.

"I came here to have a good look at the desert by night," he said. "You may be sure, Miss Fenshawe, that I had little notion you were searching for me. It was by the merest accident that I was able to stow myself out of sight in this particular locality."

She laughed softly again, and her manner became perceptibly less constrained.

"A big man and a small ship — is that it?" she asked. "Tell me, Mr. Royson, why did that officer of the Guards call you 'King Dick' on the morning of the carriage accident?"

Had the girl racked her brain for a day to frame a question intended to perplex Royson she could not have hit on one of more penetrating effect. He was astounded not because she had heard Paton's exclamation, but by reason of the flood of light which her recollection of it at that moment poured on his own wandering thoughts.

"It is a most amazing thing that you should ask me that, Miss Fenshawe," he cried.

"Sh-s-s-h. I have always imagined you to be a man who would smile in the midst of earthquakes, yet here you are quite dazzled by a harmless bit of feminine curiosity. Don't you wish me to know how you came by that nickname? I suppose it is one?"

"There is no other in whom I would confide so willingly," he said. "Promise you will not laugh at me if I tell you more than you bargain for."

"What? Is there humor in the story?"

"Let us see. I am hardly a fair judge. At present I am more than mystified. It is easy enough to explain why I was called 'King Dick' at school. That is a mere preface to my romance. One of the cherished traditions of my family is that we are lineal descendants of King Richard the First of England."

"Good gracious!"

"The statement lends itself to disbelief, I admit —"

"Why do you think me disbelieving?"

"Pray forgive me, Miss Fenshawe. I am in doubting mood myself to-night. At any rate, the lineage of the Roysons has not been disputed during many centuries. Our name is part of our proof, and there has

been a Richard Royson associated with Westmoreland ever since Cœur-de-Lion returned from Palestine. That is the kind of family asset a boy will brag of. Joined to a certain proficiency in games, it supplies a ready-made nickname. But the wonderful and wholly inexplicable thing is that while I have been standing here, watching our head-light dancing over the desert, the fantastic conceit has invaded my very soul that I share with my kingly ancestor his love of this land, his ambition to accomplish great deeds in its secret places, his contempt and scorn of all opposing influences. Do you remember how he defied a rain of blood which scared his courtiers? One of his friends has placed on record the opinion that if an angel from heaven bade Richard abandon his work he would have answered with a curse. Well, I am poor, and of slight consequence in the world to-day, but at least it has been vouchsafed me to understand what a strong man and a king can feel when there are those who would thwart his will. At present, I am powerless, as little able to give effect to my energies as Richard himself when pent in an Austrian prison, but I do ask that some Blondel shall free me, no matter what the ransom, and that Fate shall set me a task worthy of the man who fought and dreamed and planned empires out there eight centuries ago."

Royson threw back his head, and stretched his right hand toward the desert where lay Jaffa and Jerusalem. He was quite carried away by the magic of the hour. He had brushed aside the cobwebs of society, and spoke

"You need no promise from me, Miss Fenshawe"

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to Irene as a gallant and fearless youth might address the maid at whose feet he hoped to lay the trophies gained in winning his knighthood. And she, as might be expected, responded to the passionate chord which sounded this challenge to fortune. She, too, forgot convention, for which Heaven be praised!

"You have my prayers for your success," she whispered. "What is more, I believe in you, and that is why I am here now, for I have come to ask you, for my sake and the sake of one whom I love, not to leave this ship until I bid you."

At any other moment such a request must have had a sinister sound. Coming then, it seemed to be a direct answer to Dick's excited appeal to the unseen power that governs men's lives. He turned and looked into her eyes. She was so near to him that he could see the wondrous light shining in their limpid depths. He felt the fragrance of her presence, the glow of her tender beauty, and she did not shrink from him when he placed a protecting hand on her shoulder.

"You need no promise from me, Miss Fenshawe," he said, with a labored utterance that was wholly unaccountable to him. "Twice already have I refused to leave you, though I have been summoned to England to resume an inheritance wrongfully withheld. We are stubborn, we Richards, and we are loyal, too. It was you, I now believe, who snatched me from misery, almost from despair. Have no fear, therefore, that I shall desert you."

"You have taken a load from my heart," she an-

swered softly. "You are the only man on board in whom I have any real confidence. I fear that my grandfather has been misled, wilfully and shamefully misled, but I am unable to prevent it for lack of proof. But to-night, after dinner, I chanced to overhear a conversation with reference to you which redoubled the doubts I have felt ever since this expedition was decided on. I feel that I must tell you. Baron von Kerber distrusts you because you are a gentleman. He fears you will act as one if you have to choose between his interests and your own honor. And to-day, since your letter arrived —"

"Yes, ma'am," they heard Captain Stump shout from the bridge, "Miss Fenshawe is forrard, with Mr. Royson. You'll find it a very pretty sight goin' through the canal on a night like this."

And Mrs. Haxton, hunting the ship for Irene — not to speak of Royson and the girl herself when in calmer mood — may have wondered why Stump should trumpet forth his information as though he wished all on board to hear it. Perhaps it was, as Dick already well knew, that the stout skipper had good eyesight as well as a kind heart.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE PORTAL

"WHY in the world did you hide yourself in this part of the ship, Irene?" cried Mrs. Haxton, advancing with a rapidity that was in marked contrast to her usual languid movements. "I have been searching for you everywhere."

"I have not hidden myself, and you must have missed a rather large section out of your everywhere," said the girl, with a coolness that Royson found admirable.

"But Mr. Fenshawe wants you. He has been vainly awaiting his partner at the bridge table during the past twenty minutes."

"I would never have believed grandfather could be so callous. Play cards here! Where every prospect pleases and only bridge is vile! Let me bring him forth at once. Good night, Mr. Royson! Thank you so much for a nice talk. I think I shall be able now to pass an examination in the history and geography of the Suez Canal."

Dick lifted his cap, silently thanking Providence that women were more adroit than men. Mrs. Haxton seemed to take no notice of him. Indeed, she had

scarcely spoken to him since they met at Marseilles, and, were he a vain man, such studied neglect on the part of a pretty woman might have supplied food for thought. Yet it is possible that Mrs. Haxton herself would confess to a certain chagrin if she realized how small a place she occupied in his mind as he followed her along the deck. Irene flitted in front, light-limbed and agile, humming gaily a verse of some song, but breaking off in the midst to ask Captain Stump not to be very angry if she brought a party of invaders to his tiny domain. She was young enough not to feel fluttered by the knowledge that Mrs. Haxton had broken in on a somewhat dangerous interchange of confidences. She knew that she wanted a friend — some one less opinionative than Mr. Fenshawe — to whom she could appeal for help and guidance when difficulties arose. Royson was already a hero in her eyes, and what more natural than that she should turn to him, especially under the circumstances which had come to her knowledge that evening? As for Dick, he fancied that the Seuz Canal was one of the roads to Heaven.

Before he climbed into his bunk, however, he re-read Mr. Forbes's letter, and noticed then that it bore signs of interference, while von Kerber, if he had not opened it, must have jumped to the conclusion that it came from London solely because the stamp was an English one. Added to Irene's veiled warning that all was not well on board, this apparent tampering with his correspondence bore an ugly look. It almost suggested that the Baron feared he was what the London

inquiry agent had asked him to become — the paid spy of Alfieri. He wondered what hold the Italian had on the man. Now that he was able to examine recent events in perspective, he saw that von Kerber had traveled alone from London with the hope of throwing off his track any one who was watching him — and had failed. It was evident, too, that neither Mr. Fenshawe nor his granddaughter, nor Mrs. Haxton for that matter, took pains to keep their whereabouts unknown, because Dick had seen an announcement of the *Aphrodite's* cruise in a London newspaper brought on board by the pilot. Von Kerber's name was not mentioned, but the others were described briefly, the reference to Mrs. Haxton being that she was "a *persona grata* in Anglo-Egyptian society." Why, then, did the Austrian demand such secrecy from the yacht's crew, and be so perturbed by the advent of a letter addressed to one of them? But Royson's disposition was far too happy-go-lucky to permit of serious ponderings on other people's business. He laughed and reddened a little when his mind swung round to the more pleasing memory of the girl's frank sympathy, and he told himself, with deep and convincing earnestness, that next time they met he must guard his unruly tongue, else it might run away with him again, and find her in less receptive mood.

Then he fell asleep, and slept soundly, too, in blissful ignorance of a conversation then taking place in the chart-house, though it had the most direct bearing on his own future.

For von Kerber had seized the opportunity, when Mr. Fenshawe and the two ladies went below, to draw Stump into private conclave.

"We reach Suez to-morrow, captain," he said, "and that will be our last chance of getting rid of any of the crew whom you think unsuitable."

"That's so," agreed Stump, "but I can't say I've blacklisted any of 'em. The on'y fault I find with 'em is that there's too many hands for the work."

"Ah, you regard them as dependable, yes?"

"Good for any game you like to put before 'em," was the brisk summary.

"That is what I want. But tell me, captain, will you be able to replace Mr. Royson? I believe he is useful when it comes to sailing the yacht, yet I have no doubt you can dispense with him?"

Stump was shrewd in a limited way. He caught the drift of von Kerber's comment, and it did not help to further the scheme which the latter had in mind.

"Mr. Royson?" came the quick growl. "What of him? Next to Tagg, he's the best man in the crowd."

"Possibly, but I have reason to believe that he wishes to return to England."

"He hasn't said so."

"Not to you, perhaps, but I know it is so, and I do not wish to detain him when our numbers are already ample for all purposes. I am awkwardly placed in the matter, as Mr. Fenshawe feels under a slight obligation to him, so I shall be glad if you will pay him off to-morrow, on a generous basis, of course,

with every allowance for the expenses of the homeward passage."

"Wot?" said Stump, moving restlessly under von Kerber's fixed gaze. "D'ye mean it, mister?"

"I do, most certainly."

"Then you'd better fix the business yourself. You engaged him, like the rest of us. I like the lad, and I'd take it ill to be axed to fire him. No, sir. That ain't in my department this trip. It'd be a bird of another color if he was no good. But he's a first-rater, an' I, for one, will be sorry to lose him. If you don't take my word for it, ax Tagg. He knows a man when he see him, does Tagg, an' he hasn't forgotten that upper cut Mr. Royson gev' a land shark in Marseilles when the crowd set about you."

Stump was profoundly moved, or he would not have made such a long speech, and von Kerber knew that his flank attack had failed. Indeed, the gruff sailor had as good as charged him with rank ingratitude.

"Oh, if you think that way about it," said he coolly, "we can let the project drop for the present. I was only considering Mr. Royson's own interests. Whether he goes or stays, it does not concern me in the least. Have a cigarette? Ah, you prefer a pipe, yes? Well, good night, captain. We shall not be rocked to sleep by the wild waves to-night, I imagine."

Stump joined Tagg on the bridge. He jerked a thumb after the Baron's retreating figure.

"That German swab wants me to boot Royson," he muttered.

"Boot Royson? The idee! Wot for?"

"He piled it on thick about wot he called Royson's own interests, but I knew better'n that. It don't suit his book for our dandy second mate to be sparkin' the owner's granddaughter abaft the lantern. You take my tip, Tagg, that other woman, Mrs. Haxton, is as mean as sin, an' she blew the gaff to-night when she dropped on 'em after supper."

"I've always thought her a bit of a cat," agreed Tagg.

"An' wot did you say?"

"Say, I tole 'im to do his dirty work hisself. Mark my words, Tagg, he'll not tackle the job for fear it comes to the gal's ears. You watch him close up like an oyster."

Stump was a prophet worthy of honor, though Dick did not appreciate the Baron's friendly solicitude about his affairs until long afterwards. But he did learn by chance how amply justified Irene was in her fear that he might be asked to leave the ship. The *Aphrodite* was spinning down the Gulf of Suez late next day, under all her snowy spread of sail, when Royson went aloft to assure himself that a stiff pulley on the fore yard was in good working order. He found that it needed a slight readjustment, and the alteration was troublesome owing to the strain of a steady breeze. He persevered, put matters right, and was climbing down to the deck when, through the foresail, he heard voices discussing none other than himself.

Mrs. Haxton and von Kerber had strolled forward, and were leaning over the side of the ship, never dream-

ing that the man they were talking of was within a few feet of them above their heads, though hidden by the sail.

"I was exceedingly surprised to find that he was not sent ashore with the pilot at Suez," the lady was saying. "No matter what his present position may be, he is a baronet's nephew and prospective heir it would seem. It is sheer madness on your part to keep a man like him on board."

"But I tell you that I asked Stump to discharge him, and met with a blank refusal," replied the Baron irritably.

"That is even more amazing. Are not these men your servants?"

"Yes, in a sense. Try to understand me, Maud. I had to select men of good character, or they might fail me in the hour of real need. If you hire pirates you must expect them to act like pirates, yes? Stump favors Royson, so he pointed out that as I had engaged him I must dismiss him. And you know quite well, if you would only be reasonable, that any such action on my part could hardly fail to arouse some measure of doubt in Fenshawe's mind, which is the very thing we wish to avoid."

"I think you are wrong, nevertheless."

"You should not say that if you are not prepared to tell me how I could arrange an awkward business better. And what are you afraid of? He is as keen as any of us for the adventure, and he will be well paid if it succeeds."

"You are a poor conspirator, my dear Franz," laughed Mrs. Haxton disagreeably. "If you were really the clever person you think yourself you would know that such a man may leaven the whole crew with his ideas of honor. And, when the pressure comes, he will have an excellent helper in that girl. She, too, should have been left at home. Oh, nonsense! Had you given me the ordering of affairs neither she nor this young down-at-heels aristocrat would be here to-day. I am not saying this merely to annoy you, as you seem to believe, but to warn you. Be on your guard, Franz. Things are going too smoothly. No great fortune was ever yet won without a hitch or two on the road, and we are not far from the Five Hills now."

They moved away. Dick went back to his pulley, surveyed the deck over the fore yard, and deferred his descent until "Franz" and "Maud" were at the other end of the vessel. Since they came on board they had been "Baron von Kerber" and "Mrs. Haxton" in the presence of others. What desperate game were they playing that demanded these small deceits — what hazard of fortune was it that gave rise to the woman's Cassandra-like forebodings? Von Kerber had been candid enough in the statement he put forward voluntarily at Marseilles. Any one could guess the uncertainties of a quest depending on a document two thousand years old, while its dangers were manifest. Mr. Fenshawe and Irene must be cognizant of the open risks, and it was idle to suppose that they did

not appreciate the unobtrusive way in which the yacht was being hurried to her destination. Why, then, should von Kerber and Mrs. Haxton share some secret understanding, the outcome of which was doubtful, and, above all else, why should they fear the influence that a young and unknown man might exercise on the crew?

"Egypt is the land of riddles," mused Dick, as he gazed at the russet and purple hills which spring up so suddenly to guard the strange sea thrust by nature into the bosom of a fiery land. "My best course is to adopt the attitude of the Sphinx. I shall keep my eyes open and say nothing."

He forgot, however, that the chief characteristic of the Sphinx is an enduring patience, and he chafed at the colorless monotony of the next few days. The *Aphrodite* crept under sail five hundred miles to the south, until the wind died of sheer exhaustion. Then the engines took their turn, and the yacht exchanged the steady roll of a topsail schooner for the quivering uneasiness of a steam-driven ship. But sail or steam, the pace was slow, and the passage of the Red Sea left its record on the smart little vesssel in the shape of blistered paint, gaping seams, and planks from which the sweated pitch was no sooner holy-stoned than it oozed forth again to smear their purity. Though stout awnings defied the direct fury of the sun they could not shut out its glare and furnace heat. And the human barometer showed the stress of life. Stump was a caldron in himself, Tagg a bewhiskered male-

diction in damp linen. The tempers of the crew, stifling in crowded quarters, suggested that they were suffering from a plague of boils. As a mere pastime, there was an occasional fight in the forecastle. Unhappily for the disputants, Stump had a ready ear for these frays, and he would rush in to settle them with a vigor that left the pugilists prostrate. Then he would recover his caustic humor for half an hour, and regale Royson with yarns of things wot happened when the Red Sea was reelly hot. This weather was on'y warm. Why, once when he was aboard the *Ocean Queen*, her bunker gev' out six hours north o' Perim, but he whipped the awnin's off, an' the sun kep' up a head o' steam in the boilers until she ran into port.

The saloon party found existence more endurable. They had adjustable window-shades, and electric fans, and there was a sheltered deck over their heads. So they dozed away the hot hours placidly until the memorable day dawned when Stump, after much close scrutiny of charts, ventured to leave the safe channel down the center of the Red Sea and stand in towards the African coast.

"Massowah!" was on every tongue, and the general listlessness vanished. Soon a dim land-line appeared. It grew into a range of barren mountains, broken by narrow, precipice-guarded valleys. Then a thin strip of flat fore-shore became visible. It deepened into a flat island, barely two miles long, and assumed a habitable aspect. A lighthouse marked a fine harbor. A custom-house, a fort, several jetties, and a town of

fairly tall buildings stood clear from a scattered gathering of coral-built Arab houses and hundreds of grass and mat huts. In a word, man had conquered the wilderness, and a busy community had sprung into being between the silent sea and the arid earth.

While the *Aphrodite* was picking her way cautiously to the anchorage ground, Dick, who was on the bridge with the captain, heard some broken talk between Mr. Fenshawe and the Baron. The latter, with subdued energy, was urging some point which the older man refused to yield. The discussion was keen, and the millionaire betrayed a polite resentment of his companion's views.

"I am sure the Italian authorities will place no obstacle in our way," he declared at last. "When all is said and done, the interest of our trip is mainly archeological. Why should you hold this absurd notion that we may be refused official sanction?"

He spoke emphatically, with unveiled impatience. Dick could not make out the Austrian's reply, but Mr. Fenshawe's next words showed that, whatever the matter in dispute, he had a will of his own, and meant to exercise it.

"It is useless to try to convince me on that head," he exclaimed. "I would turn back this instant rather than act in the way you suggest. You must allow me to follow my original plan. We shall obtain a valid permit from the Governor. If, contrary to my expectation, he refers the final decision to the Italian Foreign Department, we shall await cabled instructions. Our

ambassador at Rome can vouch for us. He is an old friend of mine, and I only regret that I did not obey my first impulse and write to him before I left London."

Von Kerber asserted that there was some danger of the Somali Arabs becoming excited if they heard of the expedition. Mr. Fenshawe laughed.

"Arabs!" he cried. "How long has that bee buzzed in your bonnet. The only lawless tribes in this country are far away in the interior. And even they are apt to think many times before they offer active resistance to the passing of a strong and well-intentioned *kafila*. Besides, my dear fellow, we must purchase some portion of our equipment here. It is secrecy, not candor, that would endanger our mission. Believe me, you are suffering from Red Sea spleen. It distorts your normal vision. You certainly took a different view of the situation when we determined its main features in London."

Royson was careful not to look at the speakers. Between him and them was seated Mrs. Haxton, and he knew that she, too, was an attentive listener. Von Kerber began to explain the reasons which lay behind his change of opinion, but Stump's voice suddenly recalled Dick to his duties.

"Stand by the anchor, Mr. Royson," he said, "and see that everything is clear when I tell you to let go."

Irene heard the order.

"I want to watch the anchor flop overboard," she announced, springing up from a deck chair. "I think I shall accompany you, Mr. Royson."

Dick held out his hand to help her down the short companionway. They had not exchanged many words since that memorable night in the canal, and the penetrating look in the girl's eyes warned Royson now that she was about to say something not meant for others to hear.

"You have not forgotten?" she murmured.

"No," he answered.

"When we go ashore you must come with us."

"How can I make sure of that?"

"Ask Captain Stump to send you in charge of the boat. Do you know that an attempt was made to get rid of you at Suez?"

"Yes."

"It failed."

"Yes, I know that, too."

"Who told you?"

"I overheard a conversation. I could not help it."

"Well, once we are ashore I may have a chance of explaining things fully. If necessary, tell Captain Stump I wish you to escort us."

They could say no more. The telegraph rang from "Slow" to "Stop her." Two sailors were waiting in the bows, and had already cleared the anchor from its chocks. Irene leaned against the rail. She wore a pith hat, and was dressed in white muslin for shore-going, while a pink-lined parasol helped to dispel a pallor which was the natural result of an exhausting voyage. Dick thought he had never seen a woman with a face and figure to match hers, and it is to be

feared that his mind wandered a little until he was roused by a bellow from the bridge.

"Stand by, forrard. Let go-o-o!"

Luckily, Dick's office was a sinecure. The men knew what to do, and did it. With a roar and a rattle the chain cable rushed through the hawse-pipe, and the *Aphrodite* rested motionless on the green water of the roadstead.

The yacht's arrival created some stir on shore. Several boats put off, their swarthy crews contending strenuously which should have the valuable privilege of landing the expected passengers. Stump bustled down from the bridge with the important air of a man who had achieved something, and thus gave Royson an unforeseen opportunity of asking him about the boat. The skipper swung himself back to the upper deck, and approached Mr. Fenshawe.

"Are you goin' ashore at once, sir?" he inquired.

"Yes, the sooner the better, or the Government Offices will be closed for the day."

"Mr. Royson," shouted Stump, "pipe the crew of the jolly-boat, an' lower away."

"An Arab boat will be much speedier and more roomy," broke in Mrs. Haxton, quick to observe that von Kerber was not paying heed to the captain's preparations.

"You can land in one of those weird-looking craft if you like," said Irene, "but I am sure Mr. Fenshawe and I would prefer our own state barge. It is much more dignified, too, and I really think we ought to

impress the natives. Don't you agree with me, Baron von Kerber?"

There was nothing more to be said. The boat was lowered so smartly that Dick was seated at the tiller, and four ash blades were driving her rapidly shoreward, before the leading crew of panting Somalis reached the ship's side. They secured two passengers, however. Mrs. Haxton, who had declined a seat in the jolly-boat on the score of the intense heat, changed her mind, and the captain elected to go with her.

"I want to cable my missus," he announced, "an' Massowah is likely to be our last port for some time. If she don't hear from me once a month, she frets. That's where Tagg has the pull. He's an orfin."

Mrs. Haxton smiled delightedly. She was watching the distant jolly-boat, and something seemed to please her.

"Your second mate has not visited Massowah before?" she said.

"No, ma'am."

"We shall be ashore first, after all. He is heading for the Government jêtée, where a sentry will warn him off."

"Oh, you know the ropes here, then?" said Stump. "Not many English ladies have coasted in these waters."

Mrs. Haxton thought, perhaps, that she had aired her knowledge unnecessarily, but she explained that when her husband was alive she had accompanied him during a long cruise in the Red Sea.

"He was interested in cable construction," she said, "and we visited Massowah when it was first taken in hand by the Italians."

"Excuse me, ma'am, but have you bin long a widdy?"

"Nearly five years."

"By gad," said Stump admiringly, "you must ha' bin a small slip of a gal when you was married!"

She laughed, with the quiet assurance of a beautiful and well-dressed woman. Mrs. Haxton could be charming when she chose, and she wanted Stump to act exactly in accord with her own plans when they reached the town. By this time the two boats were nearly level, but separated by a hundred yards or more. The captain had half risen to hail Dick when Mrs. Haxton stopped him.

"Let them go on," she cried. "They would not take my advice. Now they will find that we have beaten them by a good five minutes."

Stump knew quite well, of course, that a broad-beamed English boat could not compete with the long, slim Somali craft, but he was aware also that Miss Fenshawe and Royson wished to land in company. So he grinned, and sat down again.

The outcome of these cross purposes was curious in many ways. As Mrs. Haxton foresaw, the jolly-boat was forbidden to land at the main wharf, and Royson discovered that the Austrian did not understand Italian. It was Irene who translated the orders shouted at them by a brigandish-looking soldier, and they had to pull off in the direction of a smaller pier

where Mrs. Haxton and Captain Stump had already disembarked in the midst of a crowd of jabbering natives.

"Now, captain," said Mrs. Haxton, with her sweetest smile, pointing to a white building in the distance, "that is the telegraph-office. We need not both remain here until our friends arrive. Suppose you go and send your cablegram in peace. By the time you have written it we shall be close behind you. Pray don't wait on my account. You see I want to crow over Miss Fenshawe."

"Just as you like, ma'am," said Stump, lifting his cap awkwardly. He went at the noisy mob like a battering-ram. "Sheer off, you black-an'-tan mongrels!" he roared at them. "Go an' ax some one to play on you with a hose-pipe. Jow, you soors! D'ye think the lady likes to be pisened?"

He cleared a space, and rolled away towards the town. Hence, he did not notice a gaunt Arab, whose flowing burnous and distinguished air singled him out from the mixed gathering of nondescripts at the landing-place, who bided his time until Mrs. Haxton looked in his direction. Then he salaamed, with a courtly blend of deference and hauteur, and she beckoned him instantly.

"You are Sheikh Abdullah?" she asked in French.

"Yes, madam," he replied, in the same language.

"You know the town well?"

"I have been waiting here two months."

"Then two more hours will not weary you. Von

Kerber Effendi, or I, or both of us, will meet you outside the Elephant Mosque at five o'clock. Nevertheless, should there be others with us, do not speak unless we address you."

"Who is he, the red ox?" demanded the Arab, gazing after the broad figure of Captain Stump.

"He is the captain of our ship, a man of no importance. The Hakim Effendi is in the approaching boat. With him is Fenshawe Effendi, the old, gray-haired man. There is a tall young ship's officer there, too. His name is Royson — you will not forget? — Royson. He is dangerous. Regard him well. He might prove troublesome, or useful — I hardly know which at present. Fenshawe Effendi speaks French and Arabic, Royson Effendi French only. That is all, for the present. Leave me now."

"Adieu, madame. À cinq heures!"

Drawing back into the mob of natives, who were pressing nearer in their eagerness to offer themselves for hire to the Europeans in the boat, Abdullah shaded his swarthy face under a fold of his burnous. Royson leaped ashore in order to assist Irene to land. She, with school-girl glee at emancipation from the narrow decks of the *Aphrodite*, sprang on to the low pier at the same instant, and laughed at his surprise at finding her standing by his side. They both extended a hand to Mr. Fenshawe, who refused their aid, saying that the first breath of dry air had made him feel as young as ever.

"There is no tonic like it," he said. "Look at Mrs.

Haxton if you want a proof. She was a lily in London — now she is a rose."

Excitement, or the prospect of success, had certainly given the lady's complexion a fine tint. Her dainty profile offered a striking contrast to the motley crew of negroid Arabs who surrounded her. And she came to meet them in a buoyant spirit, though the fierce sun was scorching her delicate skin through the thin fabric of her dress.

"I ought to have made a wager with you, Mr. Royson," she cried, pronouncing his name very distinctly. "Our English-built craft cannot hold its own against the Somali, you see."

Knowing nothing of the difference of opinion on board the yacht, Dick could not fathom this sudden graciousness on her part. Before he could answer, von Kerber's highly-pitched voice broke in.

"Why did Captain Stump come ashore with you?" he asked.

"To send Mrs. Stump a cablegram, I believe," replied Mrs. Haxton carelessly.

"He ought to have asked my permission first."

The petulant words drew a protest from Mr. Fenshawe.

"My dear Baron," he said, "why should not the poor man make known his safe arrival to his wife? You are not yourself to-day. What is it — liver? or anxiety?"

"I have no special reason for anxiety," cried von Kerber, almost hysterically. Royson came to his

relief by asking for orders about the boat, but the Austrian was so unnerved, for no visible reason, that he hesitated, and Irene answered for him.

"We have arranged to dine on shore, at the Hôtel Grande del Universo," she said. "Mr. Fenshawe wishes Captain Stump and you to join us, so the boat may go back to the yacht and come for us at eight o'clock. When you meet Captain Stump, please tell him."

"Excellent!" agreed her grandfather, who now heard of the "arrangement" for the first time. "Really, Irene, you put things so admirably that I hardly recognize my own crude thoughts. Well, as that is settled, let us go straight to the Governor's house. One of these black gentlemen will pilot us."

While Fenshawe was airing his Arabic in selecting a guide from fifty volunteers, Dick gave instructions to the boat's crew. Mrs. Haxton, seeing that Irene was all eyes for her new and strange surroundings, read von Kerber a much-needed lecture.

"For goodness' sake gather your wits," she murmured. "You will arouse general suspicion by your foolish precautions. Now listen. Before five o'clock let us all gather at the hotel for tea. Slip away on some pretext, and go instantly to the Elephant Mosque. It is in the main street, three hundred yards to the left of the hotel. I shall join you there if possible, but, in any event, you'll meet Abdullah. And, whatever you do, stop this nonsense about proceeding in secret. Ah, yes, Irene, your grandfather has his hands full. But he knows how to manage natives. You will see

The Arab appraised Royson with critical eye

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him in his element when we come to collect a *kafila*."

So, smiling and soft-tongued, Mrs. Haxton turned in response to some delighted exclamation from the girl. They made their way inland in the wake of a swaggering negro, and, as Royson passed with the others, Abdullah, the Arab, appraised him with critical eye.

"By the Holy Kaaba," said he, "there goes a man! I have seen few like him, even at Khartoum, where the giaours swarmed in thousands. But he is young, and his flesh is soft. The desert will thin his blood. And that little bull, who went before — he, too, should feel the sap dry in his bones. Tomb of my father! if the Hakim Effendi has brought such men as these in his train, there will be deeds done at the foot of the Five Hills, and I, Abdullah the Spear-thrower, shall be there to witness them."

CHAPTER VII

MRS. HAXTON RECEIVES A SHOCK

Mr. Fenshawe, renewing his acquaintance with Arabic gutturals, and von Kerber, walking apart with Mrs. Haxton, in order to learn how and when she had received tidings of Abdullah, had eyes or ears for naught else. Irene and Dick were thus given a few moments free from listeners, and the girl was quick enough to grasp the chance.

"You know why we have come here?" she asked in a low tone, halting to look back at the belt of tiny islets which secludes Massowah's larger island from the open sea.

"Baron von Kerber told us at Marseilles," said Dick, wondering what new development had chased from the girl's face the smiling interest of a moment ago.

"'Us'?" she demanded, almost sharply.

"I should have said Captain Stump, Mr. Tagg, and myself."

"What did he tell you?"

"The remarkable history of a Roman expedition against the Sabæans, of a storm, a shipwreck, the burial of a vast treasure, and the ultimate discovery of

its hiding-place by means of a Greek papyrus found in a tomb."

"That is what irritates me," said she, in a sudden gust of anger. "His behavior is faultless, yet I am certain that he is acting in an underhanded way. I have ventured to say as much to my grandfather, but I cannot obtain a shred of actual fact to justify my suspicions. Indeed Baron von Kerber is candor itself where the genuineness of the papyrus is concerned. Did he endeavor to explain Mrs. Haxton's presence, or mine?"

"When Captain Stump protested — before he had seen you, remember — against ladies accompanying us, the Baron said that without you the expedition could not proceed."

"Exactly. That is another bit of unconvincing accuracy. Mrs. Haxton has always been an essential part of the scheme. I am here solely because I did not think Mr. Fenshawe should be allowed to go alone — alone in the sense that these people were strangers to him, while he was spending many thousands of pounds for their very great benefit. There, again, I find myself in a sort of verbal *cul de sac*. Under other circumstances I should be delighted to take part in an adventure of this kind. Grandad promised me two years ago that we should pass the present winter in Upper Egypt. Unhappily, Mrs. Haxton introduced von Kerber to him at a place in the Highlands where we were invited for the shooting. The instant he heard of the legend on that wretched scrap of paper all his

old enthusiasm for exploration work revived, and he has followed their plans blindly ever since."

"I hope you will forgive me if I express a somewhat contrary opinion, Miss Fenshawe," said Royson. "Your grandfather did not hesitate to run counter to the Baron's wishes to-day, for instance."

"Oh, that is nothing. Of course, with his experience of Egypt, he takes the lead in such matters. What I want you to believe is this: Mrs. Haxton, and not von Kerber, found that papyrus, or it came into her hands by some means. She is the originator of the scheme. She sought to be included in our friend's party at Glengarloch with the set object of meeting grandad, whose interest in archeology is known to all the world. She did not come across von Kerber by accident, but produced him at the right moment. He is not a casual friend, met in Cairo, as she pretends, but a man whom she has known for years. And, last in a list of guessings which I know to be true, they both fear some discovery, or interruption, or danger not revealed to us, which may prevent them from obtaining the wealth they hope to gain. They are desperately poor, Mr. Royson. They have mortgaged their credit to its utmost extent to enable them to keep up appearances, and they dread some catastrophe which will interfere with our search, though the only authority we have for the existence of the Roman legion's loot is a scrap of scarcely decipherable writing, which, though genuine enough, may be nothing better than a madman's dream."

"Have you told Mr. Fenshawe these things?" asked Dick. His pledged word to von Kerber interposed an awkward barrier against that complete confidence which he would gladly have given to one who had so curiously amplified his own doubts.

"Yes, everything, but he only laughs, and bids me remember that I am not yet twenty. He says that there are stranger things buried beneath the dust of Egypt than all the learned societies have succeeded in revealing. He is quite content that the cruise of the *Aphrodite* should be a wild-goose chase so long as the evidence of the papyrus is proved to be false. And that is my chief stumbling-block. Perhaps you do not realize that, to an antiquarian, the search yields as keen pleasure as the find. The cost of this expedition is a matter of no consequence to my grandfather, and I repeat that, under other conditions, I should regard it as a most enjoyable and memorable excursion. But these two people have made me nervous, and that is why I was determined they should not get rid of you at Suez, because I felt that I could trust you with my doubts and fears, and look to you for help should an emergency arise. Otherwise, Mr. Fenshawe and I would be at their mercy."

"You can count on me to the end," said Royson earnestly, "but I would ask you not to forget that the officers and crew are all Englishmen, and, from what I have seen of them, they would never lend themselves to any undertaking which meant actual treachery to their employers."

"That, of course, is excellent so far as it goes," was the tart response, "but I am also aware that our enterprising Baron has very adroitly bound all of you to secrecy, and exacted a promise of faithfulness to his interests. The result is that not even you, Mr. Royson, told me anything about the attack made on him at Marseilles —"

This counter-stroke was unexpected, and Royson glanced at her with some degree of embarrassment.

"He persuaded us that if the incident came to your knowledge it might alarm you needlessly," he broke in, "and that sounded quite reasonable."

"Exactly. You are beginning to appreciate the pitfalls which awaited me when I tried to convince my grandfather that he should not credit every statement made to him. Baron von Kerber is the most plausible of men. He never tells a downright untruth. Indeed, he speaks the absolute truth, but only a part of it. Fortunately, my maid heard of your prowess in routing the Baron's assailants. You at once became a hero among the sailors, which, by the way, was only fit and proper if you are destined to fill the rôle played by your distinguished ancestor."

A quiet little smile chased the shadows from her face, and Dick flushed as he recalled the wild words of that wonderful night in the canal.

"Tagg must have been talking," he managed to say. "Please tell me what you have heard, Miss Fenshawe."

"Nothing beyond the fact that our Austrian friend was set upon by some highway robbers while driving

from the station to the ship at a late hour, and that you and Mr. Tagg happened to be near, with disastrous results to the Marseillais. Does your bond permit you to carry the story further? What did really happen?"

"There was a rather one-sided fight, because Tagg and I took them by surprise, but the Baron escaped uninjured, or nearly so."

"Did they rob him, then?"

"I meant that he sustained a couple of slight cuts, and therein you have another valid reason for his anxiety that the affair should not reach your ears."

Though her own manner was imperious enough, Irene was manifestly surprised at the annoyance apparent in Dick's voice. She did not realize that he was wroth because of the check imposed by the promise exacted in London. If he told her of the theft of the papyrus, and explained the few details he possessed with regard to von Kerber's declared enemy, he would only add fuel to the distrust already planted in her heart. That would achieve no tangible good, while no casuistry would wipe away the stain on his own honor. So here was he, burning with desire to assure her of his devotion, forced into silent pact with the very conspiracy she was denouncing.

She attributed his sudden gruffness to a distaste for hearing his exploits lauded.

"At any rate, you now understand my motive for speaking so plainly, Mr. Royson," she went on. "You may feel bound by your arrangement with the Baron, and I have no fault to find on that score, but I am

quite certain, since I have learnt who you are, that you will not lend yourself to any discreditable plan which may be in the minds of the remarkable pair who are now looking at us, and wondering, no doubt, what we are discussing so earnestly."

Royson saw that von Kerber and Mrs. Haxton were awaiting them at the door of the post-office, but the personal allusion to himself, which Miss Fenshawe had dropped, in parenthesis as it were, into her concluding sentence, demanded a question.

"Will you enlighten me on the interesting point of my identity, then?" he asked rapidly.

"Oh yes. I take it that your Port Said letter was opened and read. Mrs. Haxton is skilled at jumping to conclusions, I fancy. She said she recognized your name at Marseilles — when the telegram arrived, you know — but, if that were so, it is strange that she should keep the knowledge to herself until all of us were at dinner after leaving Port Said. I also can add two and two occasionally, and I have not the slightest doubt that something in your letter gave her the necessary clue. Was she mistaken?"

"In what?"

"In the belief that you are the nephew of a baronet, and his heir?"

He laughed pleasantly. After years of indifference, his birthright was pursuing him with a certain zest.

"You could not have chosen a better example of those half-truths you complain of," said he. "I admit that my uncle is Sir Henry Royson, but his heir he

vowed I should not be when last we met. Yet the letter you speak of was from his solicitor, and it held out a vague suggestion of possibilities which, to put it mildly, would make Mrs. Haxton a remarkably good guesser."

A silence fell upon them as they neared the others. Irene disdained to use any subterfuge, and Royson was far too perplexed to branch off into a new conversation meant for the general ear. Mrs. Haxton and the Austrian also broke off their talk. They were about to enter the post-office when Mr. Fenshawe came out.

"Here you are," he cried. "Lots of letters and newspapers. Take them, Irene, and sort them out. The Baron and I must hurry to the Governor's house. We can read our correspondence at the hotel."

Von Kerber had evidently profited by his stroll with Mrs. Haxton. He raised no objection, but went off at once with the older man. Irene managed to open the bulky, string-tied package entrusted to her. She gave Mrs. Haxton several letters, and added to Royson's already bewildered state by handing him three, two being directed to him in his right name and the third bearing the superscription "Richard King, Esq."

He knew that Miss Fenshawe had noticed the alias, and took it as a kindly act that she passed no remark on it. He was equally well aware that Mrs. Haxton was alive to the fact that there were letters for him. Stump, who made his appearance at the moment,

added a whiff of awkwardness when he saw the envelopes in Dick's hands.

"Hello!" he growled, "you've bin pretty spry. Letters, eh? How did you work it?"

"I am not able to tell you," was the frank answer. "Evidently some one in London discovered the yacht's route long before I knew it myself."

"That's funny," said Stump, with a hint of doubt in the exclamation.

"It is probably a simple enough matter if it were cleared up," said Irene off-handedly. "The *Aphrodite's* ports of call are quite open to the knowledge of any person who takes the trouble to inquire at Mr. Fenshawe's residence. Mr. Royson will find, no doubt, that his friends followed that course when he failed to let them know whither the vessel was bound. But it is too hot to stand here in the sun. Let us go to the hotel and look through our budget in comfort."

When opportunity served, Dick glanced at his unexpected mail. The two letters for "Royson" were from Forbes. They bore different dates. The first stated that Sir Henry Royson was seriously ill, and had given urgent instructions that his nephew was to be brought to his bedside. "I have reason to believe," wrote the lawyer, "that your uncle has sustained some shock, perhaps arising from the sudden receipt of intelligence hitherto withheld from him, and I would fail in my duty if I did not urge you to cast aside all other considerations and return to England at once."

The second letter was even more explicit. "The

person from whom I have received information of your whereabouts," said Mr. Forbes, "has called on me to-day, and the facts he has laid before me demand your earnest consideration. He is assured that the treasure-hunting expedition you have joined is a compound of piracy and rascality, in which Mr. Fenshawe is a dupe, having been misled by a man who has incurred the gravest suspicion of felony. The Italian Government is taking steps to procure this person's arrest, and, whether or not the charges brought against him be substantiated, it is an assured thing that the movements of the *Aphrodite* will be watched, with a view towards the armed prevention of any landing from her in Italian territory. You must know that I have the strongest grounds for this statement, or I would not dare place my opinion in writing. If you think it will serve any useful purpose, I authorize you to show this letter to Mr. Fenshawe, only stipulating that I am giving him a friendly warning (which will soon be verified by events) and that my name must not be used in any investigation he may choose to make. It may help you to arrive at a right decision if I tell you that I have traced you with the help of Lieutenant the Hon. John S. Paton, of the Coldstream Guards, who saw an advertisement I inserted in the *Times*, and gave me the date of a carriage accident in Buckingham Palace Road, in which you seem to have displayed the courage and resource that might be looked for in one of your family. Inquiry showed that the carriage was Mr. Fenshawe's, and one of my clerks,

after visiting Mr. Fenshawe's house, was accosted by a man who was able to prove that he had accurate knowledge of your movements. I am told that he is writing Mr. Fenshawe fully by this mail, so, in any event, I feel confident of your early departure from Massowah, believing, as I do, that Mr. Fenshawe will not continue to lend his name to an undertaking of bad repute."

The third letter, that addressed to "King," was from a Mr. William Fielding, "Confidential Inquiry Agent," who revealed himself as Mr. Forbes's informant. He wrote in similar strain to the solicitor, and added: "I have directed the envelope to you in the name under which you shipped on board the *Aphrodite*, though I am aware that a telegram sent to you at Marseilles in your proper name reached you. If you will kindly seek a private interview with Mr. Fenshawe, and tell him how a man named Alfieri, with others, attacked Baron von Kerber at Marseilles, and robbed and wounded him without any subsequent protest on his part, you will help in undoing a great wrong."

Royson was sitting in the balcony veranda on the first floor of the Hôtel Grande del Universo when his astonished eyes skimmed rapidly through these letters. Scarce crediting his senses, he read them again, word by word, striving to extract from their cryptic sentences that hidden meaning which lay beneath. Outspoken as the solicitor was, he had evidently left unsaid the major portion of the strange story within his ken. The new correspondent, too, might or might not be

the man whom Dick had seen in Hyde Park and at Charing Cross Station. But the same curious guardedness was apparent in each missive. The lawyer dealt in generalities; the private detective merely asked for the corroboration of a single detail in the statement which, doubtless, awaited Mr. Fenshawe's perusal among the letters now piled on a table by the side of Miss Fenshawe's chair.

At the thought, Dick turned and looked at Irene. She was smiling at some quip or bit of lively news in a closely-written sheet. Near her, Mrs. Haxton was engaged more deeply. The letter clasped in her long slender fingers was as obviously a business document as Irene's was the crossed and interlined product of a feminine pen overflowing with gossip. Stump was leaning on the railing of the veranda, contemptuously heedless of the efforts of half a dozen vendors of carpets, ostrich feathers, fruit, sweets, and Abyssinian curios, who had gathered in the street beneath and were endeavoring vociferously to secure his patronage for their wares. So Dick had leisure to think out a line of action, and he saw no reason to dispute the soundness of the advice given him by Mr. Forbes. If the owner of the *Aphrodite* were unknowingly lending himself to an illegal quest, it was the duty of an honest man to warn him. The agreement with von Kerber stood in the way perhaps. In that case, it must be terminated. Such a resolve was rather bitter to the taste, but it was unavoidable. To travel home by the next mail steamer from Aden would be a tame ending to an adventure

that promised so well in its initial stages. And what of his vow not to desert the girl who had placed her faith in him? Well, he would best serve her by opening Mr. Fenshawe's eyes to the character of his associates, for Dick had no manner of doubt that Mrs. Haxton was the leading spirit in the plot of which the millionaire was the "dupe," according to the lawyer.

But Royson had found adversity a hard task-master. He had learnt early the lesson that a man who takes a leap in the dark should at least jump from firm ground, and when he asked himself what was the definite charge he would prefer against von Kerber his logic was brought to an abrupt halt. In plain English, he depended on a few words in the solicitor's letter, and these, in their turn, were probably inspired by the one-sided statements of the Austrian's avowed enemy, Alfieri. This consideration brought him back to the starting-point in his review of a puzzling situation. Fielding, whoever he might be, had done the right thing in placing his case before Mr. Fenshawe by letter. It would serve to clear the ground, and give scope for the interference of one who really had no cause of complaint against von Kerber.

"Anyhow," reflected Royson, smiling at the queer manner in which many opposing interests helped to entangle him in a mesh of difficulties, "I need not rush my fences. Let Fenshawe read his letter, and, above all else, let me seek counsel from his granddaughter. Then, by happy chance, I may hit on the right line."

When a young man does not want to deprive himself of the company of a nice young woman, he may be depended on to argue himself into a state of mind which does not demand such a sacrifice.

At that instant Irene rose and told Captain Stump that she agreed with him — a scrutiny of the chattering mob in the street was more to her taste than a description of the frocks worn at the last court ball. Dick pocketed his letters, and would have joined them had he not noticed that Mrs. Haxton was bending forward in her chair and examining the mixed pile of correspondence on the table. There was no grave significance in the action, because a number of magazines and newspapers were mixed with the heap, and these were more or less common property. But Royson, knowing of the existence of one document of exceeding importance, acted on the principle that if opportunity makes the thief Mrs. Haxton's reputation should remain unsullied that day if it lay in his power. He lit a cigar, wheeled his chair slightly, and sat facing her, at a distance of ten or twelve feet. The open railing of the veranda was half as far away on his right and on Mrs. Haxton's left. Through the narrow rails they both could see the opposite pavement, with its dun-colored throng of natives and the gloomy interiors of several small shops, while the white walls and close-latticed windows of the upper stories seemed to be bleaching visibly in the slanting rays of a fierce afternoon sun.

Mrs. Haxton, apparently giving no heed to Royson,

glanced listlessly at the wrappers and postmarks. The task seemed to prove uninteresting. Soon she selected a periodical, and was about to open it when a remark from Irene caught her ear.

"That Italian standing in front of the grain-dealer's place seems to be rooted to the ground with astonishment at seeing strangers in the hotel," said the girl, turning her smiling face towards her companion.

"Them Dagos is impident pups at times, miss," replied Stump, his red eyes no doubt meeting the man's stare with a fixity that might have disconcerted most gapers.

"Does he know you, do you think? I happened to see him coming along the street, and as soon as he saw us he stood stock-still. He has been gazing up here now for the past two or three minutes."

"I've booted a rare lot of I-talians in my time," said Stump. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he was some loafer I'd helped across a ship's gangway at Genoa or Naples."

"But, captain," laughed Irene, "that man appears to be a superior class."

"Bless yer heart, miss, that's nothin'. By the cut of his jib I'd rate him as a fiddler, an' I remember once, at Brindisi, I was pointed out two counts an' a markee among the coal-heavers."

Naturally enough, Mrs. Haxton and Dick looked for the person whose singular behavior was under discussion. Though they had no difficulty in finding him, it was impossible that they themselves could be seen

with any degree of clearness. The railing and the deep shade of the veranda shielded them effectually. The Italian, a man of middle height, with a finely-molded face and soldierly aspect, a man whose bearing went far to prove that Stump's general estimate of a great nation was apt to be wrong, was certainly very much taken up with the appearance of the two figures leaning over the balcony. But Royson had scarce time to note his main characteristics when he heard Mrs. Haxton utter a queer gasping sob. It seemed to him that she had only just succeeded in smothering a scream. Her cheeks suddenly became ashen gray, and her tightly compressed lips were bloodless. All her beauty fled, as the tints of a rose die under certain varieties of chemical light. Her eyes dilated in an alarming way, and lines not visible previously now puckered the corners of her mouth.

Owing to the Babel of tongues in the street, neither Irene nor Captain Stump knew how terribly the mere sight of the staring Italian had affected Mrs. Haxton. It came to Royson with a flash of inspiration that this man must be Alfieri, that the woman had recognized him, and that she feared him with a mortal dread.

He sprang upright and went to her.

"What is it?" he asked, neither raising nor lowering his voice sufficiently to attract attention. "Are you ill? Shall I call Miss Fenshawe?"

She lifted an appealing hand, and tremblingly essayed to drop her veil. Her languid insolence had

vanished with her good looks. For the moment, she was a broken and despairing woman.

"No, no," she murmured, and the anguish in her voice would have aroused sympathy in a nature far less impressionable than Royson's. "If you could help me, and all of us, try and find Baron von Kerber, and tell him — tell him — I sent you with the message that there is one here whom he must not meet. Oh, what shall I say to make him understand?"

"May I tell him that Alfieri is in Massowah?"

Dick almost regretted the words when he witnessed their tremendous effect. She was on the very brink of hysteria, and the suddenness of her collapse was painful.

"You — you, too, know Alfieri?" she gasped, looking at him in a very agony of terror.

"I am sorry if I have added to your alarm. I did not mean to do that. Alfieri is unknown to me, but I heard his name at Marseilles, when he attacked the Baron."

The pity he could not withhold seemed to give her new strength.

"An attack!" she whispered. "At Marseilles! Oh, why was I not told? But you will find him, at the Governor's house! It is not far — on the seaward point. . . . The hotel people will supply a guide. . . . Baron von Kerber and Alfieri must not meet here. If they do meet, we shall lose everything. . . . Tell the Baron to go on board the yacht, no matter what Mr. Fenshawe says. Do you understand? It is a matter

of life and death. Slip out into a back street, so that Alfieri may not see you. . . . I will watch from here. Go, for Heaven's sake. Let nothing delay you."

She was incapable of further explanation. Dick feared she would faint if he waited another second.

Hence, when Irene turned to say that Mr. Fenshawe and the Baron appeared to be paying a prolonged visit to the Governor, she found that Mrs. Haxton was sitting alone, with her veiled face propped on her hands, while, so malicious was fate's decree once more to Royson, that he was then hastening through malodorous lanes and crowded slums in order to save from threatened peril the very man whose downfall offered the only visible means by which he could bend his own frail fortunes in the direction that looked best to him.

CHAPTER VIII

MASSOWAH ASSERTS ITSELF

Royson knew not one word of Arabic. His Italian was of a rudimentary type, based on some acquaintance with Latin, eked out by a few phrases gleaned from books of travel. The polite hotel manager's French was only a shade more fluent. Consequently, the latter told Mulai Hamed, deputy assistant hall-porter, that the Effendi wished to be conducted to Government House with the utmost secrecy, thus twisting Dick's simple request that the guide should avoid the main streets into a mysterious demand which an Eastern mind could not fail to embroider with intrigue.

For Mulai Hamed was a negroid Arab, whose ruffianly aspect was rather enhanced by the swaggering way he carried a broad shoulder-belt and brass badge of office. He interpreted his orders literally, being eager to display a certain skill in conducting to an artistic finish any enterprise that savored of guile. As soon as the two quitted the hotel, Royson saw that he was traversing by-paths seldom visited by Europeans. He passed through evil-smelling alleys so shut in by lofty houses that the sun hardly ever penetrated their depths. He caught glimpses of dun interiors when

forced aside by a panier-laden mule or lumbering camel, and the knowledge was thrust upon him in many ways that his presence in this minor artery of the bazaar was resented by its inhabitants.

The few females he met were swathed from head to foot in cotton garments that had once been white. Dark eyes glanced curiously at him over the yashmak, or veil, which covered nose, cheeks, and mouth from the gaze of strangers. Orange-tinted nails and finger-tips, visible occasionally when the loose fold of a robe was snatched from the contamination of touching him, suggested the talons of a bird of prey rather than the slender well-shaped hand for which the Arab woman is noteworthy. Every man, almost without exception, scowled at him. Naked children, playing in the gutter, ran off, half frightened, yet stopped to shriek words which he was quite sure were not kindly greetings. Prowling dogs, the scavengers of the native quarter, shared the general hostility, and scurried out of his path, but sullenly, and with bared teeth. Through occasional sunlit vistas he peeped into main streets in which loitered numbers of Italian soldiers and civilians. Even a few carriages appeared, conveying ladies to the shops or public gardens, now that the intense heat of the sun had subsided. Therefore he found it scarcely credible that in the fetid slums there should be such covert hatred of the white race which held undisputed sway in thoroughfares distant not a stone's throw. And, in puzzling contrast to the evidences of eye and ear, he was conscious of an uncanny sense of familiarity

with his surroundings. Before the *Aphrodite* brought him south by east he had never been nearer Egypt than Paris. Yet the sights, the sounds, the nauseating smell of this dank bazaar, appealed to him with the breathless realism that the jingle of hansoms, the steady crunch of omnibuses, the yelling of newsboys and the tar-laden scent of the wood-paved road might convey when next he entered the Strand.

This entirely novel and disquieting conceit recalled his strange obsession when first he looked out over the desert at night from the bows of the yacht, and the memory brought with it the legend of his house — that the Roysons were descendants of Cœur-de-Lion. He saw now that which he had never realized from the glowing pages of written romance, that the Crusaders must have mixed with people nearly identical in manner and speech with the strange human miscellany of Massowah. During those medieval campaigns in an arid and poverty-stricken land, feudal pomp and regal glitter would yield perforce to the demands of existence. Richard of England and Philip of France, with many another noble warrior of high repute, had doubtless been glad enough, times without number, to seek the shelter and meager fare of just such a jumble of darkened tenements as that through which his guide was leading him.

But why should he, Richard Royson, acknowledge an occult acquaintance with this unknown scene? And what was the fascination which the squalid life of the bazaar had exercised occasionally on men of exalted

rank at different periods of the world's history? The mere notion that he might succumb to it — that he should even feel its glamour by the operation of some subtle trait of heredity — was so grotesque that he laughed aloud.

He happened to be crossing a tiny square at the moment, and a bearded moullah was entering a mosque which filled one whole side of it. The unbeliever's mirth doubtless disturbed a pious meditation, and the moullah turned and muttered something. The words might be a verse of the Koran, but they had the ring of a malediction.

Mulai Hamed was abashed and angry. He spoke apologetically to the holy man, alluded to the "giaour" more than once, and proceeded to give Dick a voluble lecture, enlightening him, most probably, as to the exceeding importance of politeness where a Mahomedan priest was concerned.

Royson was unable to explain that his hilarity was not intended as a slight on the follower of the Prophet. Yet dignity demanded he should not remain dumb, so he pointed ahead, and vociferated, with a fairly accurate assumption of his skipper's voice and manner:

"Lead on, you swab, and keep silent, or I'll alter the shape of your face."

It sufficed, nor was he wholly mistaken in his rough-and-ready philosophy, for it is thus that the West dominates the East. The incident had the further effect of arousing Royson to actualities. He dis-

missed his day-dream, and bent his wits to consideration of the queer message which Mrs. Haxton had asked him to deliver. Would the Austrian obey her, he wondered? A man's point of view and a woman's differ materially when the graver crises of life have to be faced. If it were merely a question of physical courage, Dick imagined that the Baron would refuse to play the coward's part by skulking on board the yacht. In that event, von Kerber and Alfieri could hardly fail to meet within the hour, for Massowah was a small place. Nor was it altogether probable that bloodshed would be the outcome. The affray at Marseilles had given the Italian an excellent opportunity for settling old scores in that fashion if he were so minded. At any rate, the position was rife with dramatic possibilities, and each that presented itself to Dick's judgment seemed to favor his own projects, which now demanded a speedy return to England. Yet he hoped to arrange his departure in such wise that Irene Fenshawe might not have it in her heart that he had deserted her.

Dick did not admit, even to himself, that he had any well-defined motive, other than the fulfilment of a promise, for wishing to stand well in the girl's esteem.

"I may be a potential baronet," he communed, "but I am not such a fool as to fall in love with the heiress of a man like Fenshawe. A baronet, indeed! Hardly a month ago I was tramping the streets of London looking for work. One does not, under those conditions, include in the list of prospective occupations

marriage with a young lady worth a million or two."

It was surprising how bitter this very sensible reflection could be. It disturbed his placid temper. He felt like railing at fate for ill-usage. Fortunately, Mulai Hamed had no further cause to chide the Effendi on account of his seeming irreverence, or Dick's copying of Stump's methods might not have been confined to speech.

But it was a remarkable fact, worthy of high relief in the fresco of weird and startling events then vaguely grouping themselves, that Royson first dreamed of love, even as a fantastic idyll where Irene Fenshawe was concerned, while he was hurrying through the native quarter of Massowah on a mission destined to change the whole course of his life.

For the hour was at hand when he would be tried by tests that few men might endure. Treading close on the heels of his guide, he emerged from a cramped arch into a spacious parade-ground. A regiment of *bersaglieri* was assembling for drill during the comparatively cool interval before sunset, and, on the seaward side of the plain, a squat fort pointed its guns at town and harbor.

Mulai Hamed hastened towards the nearest gate. He did not enter, but his gestures showed that the Governor's residence stood inside the fortifications. Royson went on alone, and was stopped by a sentry, who called a corporal; the latter conducted him to a lieutenant, and thenceforth Dick's progress was sim-

plified, because the officer not only spoke English but was ready to display his erudition, though not exactly in the manner desired by his questioner.

When Royson said he wanted to communicate with two gentlemen who had called on the Governor some two hours earlier, the Italian smiled darkly.

"They landed from the English yacht out there?" he asked, with a hand-flourish that indicated the Red Sea generally and the *Aphrodite* in particular.

"Yes."

"And you are one of the ship's officers?"

"Yes," said Dick again.

"Well, I have no orders. I advise you to go on board, and await his Excellency's decision."

"It will be most gratifying to learn his Excellency's decision," said Royson, "but just at this moment I must ascertain the whereabouts of Mr. Fenshawe and Baron von Kerber."

The lieutenant spread both hands deprecatingly.

"What is one to say?" he shrugged, arching his eyebrows and pursing his lips. "I repeat, I have no orders."

"But you have seen them?"

"Oh, yes. They are here."

"Then will you oblige me by sending in my name to Baron von Kerber, and saying —"

"It is impossible. Go to your ship. I speak as a friend."

"I am sure you wish to help me," persisted Dick, "but I am carrying a message of some importance —"

"Ah, from whom?"

"From a lady."

"Who is she?"

"One of the ladies of our party."

"*Ahi, crudo Amor!* You have ladies on board, then?"

"Yes, Mr. Fenshawe's granddaughter, and — a friend of hers."

Something in the Italian's manner warned Royson that he was treading on unsafe ground. It occurred to him that if Mrs. Haxton had good reason for her display of fear at the sight of Alfieri it was advisable not to spread the tidings of her presence in Massowah by revealing it to an inquisitive official. And the warning given in one of the letters in his pocket suddenly assumed a sinister significance. He strove against any outward exhibition of concern, and the lieutenant was manifestly anxious to help him.

"I am sorry," was the unsatisfying statement. "I can do nothing without his Excellency's instructions, and he has gone out for a drive."

"Gone out for a drive!" repeated Royson, quite taken aback by this rather bewildering explanation. "Am I to understand that my friends are kept here —"

"You are to understand nothing but what I have told you, and you will remember that I have contented myself with advising you to return to your yacht."

It was evident that no good end could be achieved by striving to saddle the courteous officer with any

responsibility for his admissions. Dick took the cue thus offered, and tried another line.

"Will you kindly tell me at what hour the Governor returns?" he asked.

"Certainly. He will be here in twenty minutes."

"May I wait until he arrives?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

The lieutenant clapped his hands, and an orderly appeared.

"Some wine, ice, and cigarettes," he commanded. He engaged Dick instantly in conversation as to the prospects of war in South Africa, and was obviously desirous not to discuss personal matters. He was a decent fellow, and an enthusiastic admirer of the British soldier, of whom he had seen a good deal during a visit to Aden, so the talk did not flag till the clatter of hoofs through the vaulted gateway announced the advent of a carriage.

The Governor, a fat, unhealthy-looking man, whose seamed brow and puffy eyelids suggested that negotiations with King Menelek did not constitute the highest form of diplomatic happiness, was pleased to be explicit when Dick was introduced to him, and he found that the Englishman spoke French.

"After consultation with the Government advocate," he said, "I have decided to release Mr. Fenshawe, whose arrest was due to his persistent defense of Baron Franz von Kerber's undertaking. The latter must remain in custody, and I warn you, and intend to give the same warning to all persons on board your vessel,

that a gunboat is patrolling the coast with the most positive instructions to sink the *Aphrodite* if any attempt be made to land on Italian territory, elsewhere than at a recognized port."

His Excellency had cultivated the habit of plain speaking, which is an essential part of all dealings with Abyssinians. Royson did not attempt to answer him. He asked if Mr. Fenshawe would be set at liberty forthwith, and was assured that the Governor's own carriage would convey both Mr. Fenshawe and himself to the hotel within a few minutes. The big little man then vanished, and Dick soon had the satisfaction of seeing Irene's grandfather escorted to the inner courtyard by a file of soldiers.

It was a singular meeting between the two. Though the yacht-owner was white with anger, he was manifestly pleased at finding Royson there.

"Ah," he said, extending his hand, "I am glad to see you. Does Miss Fenshawe know of this outrage?"

"No, sir. I think not. Indeed, I am almost positive she has not heard of it."

"Then why are you here?"

"Mrs. Haxton sent me with a message to Baron von Kerber."

"Mrs. Haxton probably guessed what would happen. Some scoundrel named Alfieri, who has tried more than once to steal my poor friend's secret, has gained the ear of the Italian foreign minister. Trumped-up allegations have led to cabled orders for von Kerber's

arrest, and these wretched organ-grinders in uniform would have lodged every one of us in prison if they dared. Unhappily, the Baron is an Austrian subject, and there will be considerable delay before I can secure his freeedom. We must make for Aden at once. I will not trust the cable from Massowah. By Jove, I have been a supporter of peace all my life, Mr. Royson, but it is a lucky thing for this thieves' den that I have not an armed ship now at my disposal, or I would blow their fort out of its foundations."

The older man little knew how this outburst affected Royson. The reference to Alfieri was absolutely staggering. No up-to-date battleship could have demolished the Massowah fortress so effectually as Mr. Fenshawe's outspoken wrath crumbled the edifice of doubt built by circumstances in Royson's mind.

"Things have taken an extraordinary turn, sir," said he, feeling it incumbent on him to say something.

"They will turn an Italian Governor out of his position before I have done with them," was the determined answer. "Come, Mr. Royson, let us leave this man-trap. I came here in good faith, and I quit the place with the resolution that never again shall I entrust myself to the vagaries of any Jack-in-office who thinks he can browbeat a man of my repute like one of the wretched natives whom he misrules."

Royson had some difficulty in persuading his irate employer to enter the Governor's carriage. Mr. Fenshawe only yielded to the plea that it was a stiff walk to the hotel, and his granddaughter would be

consumed with anxiety if any alarming news had reached her meanwhile.

The coachman took them by an open road facing the harbor. The sight of the *Aphrodite* lying at anchor, trimly elegant in white paint and neatly-furled sails, and sporting the ensign of a famous yacht club, led Dick to ask if his companion knew that an Italian gunboat was on the lookout for her.

"Oh, yes. His Excellency spared me no details," said Mr. Fenshawe, smiling sarcastically. "If I were a few years younger, and we had no women on board, I would not allow any threats of that sort to hinder me, and I am much mistaken in my officers and men if they refused to back me up. But, as it is, we can do nothing. That is what galls me, my complete helplessness."

"We have no heavy guns, I admit," said Dick, casting to the winds all thought of leaving the ship under present conditions, "but we have arms and ammunition in plenty to make it hot work for any one in Massowah to stop us once we are ashore."

The other sighed, whether on account of his vanished youth or the impracticable nature of the scheme, it is hard to say.

"Our weapons are meant only for defense," he said. "Von Kerber wished to guard against Arab hostility — that is all. But I do not despair of obtaining redress from Rome. Surely it cannot be known there that I am the leader of this expedition. It is so wildly absurd to treat *me* as a filibuster. Why, Mr. Royson,

the Italian Archeological Society elected me an honorary vice-president ten years ago."

Dick had his own views as to the extent of the *Aphrodite's* armament, but the present was no time to air them. Moreover, he was beginning to see features of the affair that were hard to reconcile with Mr. Fenshawe's statements. In the first instance, the Governor had acted on specific instructions, and the Roman authorities must have been well aware of the identity of the yacht's owner. Again, the person really aimed at in these high-handed proceedings was von Kerber. The Governor made no secret of the fact that the millionaire was detained solely because he declared himself a principal in the Austrian's enterprise, and it was no small token of official regret at an unpleasant incident that they were now driving to the hotel in His Excellency's private carriage. Finally, none but a man angry and humiliated would deny the right of Italy to forbid the passage through her colonial territory of a foreign force such as von Kerber had provided, a force equipped to an extent and in a manner that Mr. Fenshawe, in all likelihood, had slight knowledge of.

So Dick listened in silence to his companion's vows of diplomatic vengeance. He was resolved to talk matters over with Miss Fenshawe before he said a word about Alfieri or the news he had received from London. In fact, he had little doubt that a night's reflection would render her grandfather amenable to reason. If there were charges against von Kerber, let them be brought to light. If they were true, the

Italian Foreign Office was justified in its action: if false, there would be such a hubbub that the resultant apologies would certainly be accompanied by the offer of every assistance to the objects of the expedition.

When they drew near the hotel, Royson saw Irene watching the main street anxiously from the balcony. It was rather remarkable that she should be alone, but all other thoughts were swept aside by the sight of the joy which lit her face when the carriage stopped at the portico and she learned that her grandfather had arrived from an opposite direction.

They heard her glad cry of surprise, and she hastened to meet them.

"Good gracious, grandad," she said, "where have you been? I have waited here for you ever so long, wondering what had become of you."

"The Governor was such an affable person that he refused to let me go," said Mr. Fenshawe grimly. "He has detained the Baron altogether. But let us go up-stairs. I am pining for that long-deferred tea. Where is Mrs. Haxton?"

"She is ill, I am afraid. She found the heat and noise too much for her. Half an hour ago she asked Captain Stump to take her to the yacht. Of course I told her I didn't mind being left here until some one came. But the funny part of it is that, although I was looking from the veranda, I failed to see either her or the captain leave the hotel."

By this time they were free from inquisitive eyes or ears, and Mr. Fenshawe proceeded to amaze the girl

with a full recital of his disagreeable adventure. Royson noticed that she gave no heed whatever to his share in it. Her attitude was tinged with a slight disdain, and he began to feel miserably depressed until it occurred to him that she probably resented his departure on Mrs. Haxton's errand without letting her know. That was consoling, to an extent. He was sure she would forgive him when he had an opportunity of telling her exactly what had happened.

They were so engrossed in their conclave that a servant entered with lamps before they realized that daylight had waned and night was falling with the rapidity of the tropics. Mr. Fenshawe leaped up from his chair with an alertness that belied his years.

"I must break my resolution and send at least one cablegram from Massowah," he cried. "It will be harmless enough to escape mutilation, as it is to my London office directing that all correspondence must be addressed to Aden in future. You will take it for me, Royson, and pay the cost?"

Dick went off as soon as the message was ready. Irene avoided him ostentatiously while her grandfather was writing, and thereby laid herself open to the unjust suspicion that she was flirting with him. In very truth, she was torn with misgiving, and Royson's share in her thoughts was even less than he imagined. Her quick brain divined that the arrest of von Kerber had only strengthened the Austrian's claim on Mr. Fenshawe's sympathies. Like all generous-souled men, her grandfather ran to extremes, and she felt that it

was hopeless now to try and shake his faith in one whom he regarded as the victim of persecution.

"Will Captain Stump come back for dinner?" inquired Mr. Fenshawe, after he had glanced through the letters which Irene brought to him.

"I hope so. Mrs. Haxton went off in such a hurry that I forgot to mention it."

"Was it illness, or anxiety, that sent her to the yacht?"

"A little of both, I fancy. But why should she be anxious? She did not know that matters had gone wrong at the fort."

"I think she made a shrewd guess, but was unwilling to alarm you. That is why she sent Mr. Royson after us. By the way, what did she tell him to do?"

"I have no idea," said Irene coldly.

"That is odd, distinctly odd. I meant to ask him, but forgot it in my excitement."

"He will be here in a few minutes," said she, with a livelier interest.

There was a knock at the door. A negro waiter had something to say, and she gathered from a jumble of Italian and Arabic that a native wished to see the Signora Haxton. The man pronounced the name plainly, so there could be no mistake as to his meaning, and Irene answered:

"The Signora is not here."

Mr. Fenshawe was immersed in his letters again, but he looked up.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Some man is asking for Mrs. Haxton," she told him.

"Better go and interview him. If he can tell us anything, bring him here."

She went down-stairs with the attendant. He pointed to a muffled Arab near the door, who salaamed deeply the instant she appeared.

"What do you want?" she said, in Italian, and the Arab silently indicated a closed vehicle drawn up close to the curb in front of the hotel. Thinking there was some visitor inside who did not wish to alight, she went forward without hesitation. The dim, smoke-laden street was unusually crowded, she thought, but she gave no attention to the passers-by, as the Arab had opened the door of the dingy-looking vehicle, and she expected to find an occupant peering out at her.

The conveyance was empty!

"There is some mistake," she said, glancing from the dark interior to a Somali driver, and then back to the silent messenger. Suddenly she had an unnerving consciousness that several other white-sheeted figures had crept stealthily between her and the doorway. With a little cry of alarm, she turned and strove to re-enter the hotel. Instantly she was swept off her feet, a coarse hand closed on her mouth, and she was dragged with brutal force into the carriage. She saw spring into existence what seemed to be a murderous *fracas* among a dozen men. The street was filled with clamor, and the pavement was blocked with struggling forms. Knives flashed, brawny-armed Arabs closed

in deadly combat, and cursed each other with all the rich repertory of Islam. Of course, people tried to rush from the vestibule of the hotel to ascertain what was causing the tumult. But the fighters filled the doorway so that none could enter or leave the building, and, in the midst of the alarm and confusion, the pair of Somali ponies attached to the ramshackle vehicle were whipped into a fast gallop. Then the riot subsided as quickly as it arose, and, were it not that Irene was gone, no one appeared to be much the worse.

CHAPTER IX

A GALLOP IN THE DARK

SEVERAL minor rills of events combined to produce this tempestuous torrent at the door of the Hôtel Grande del Universo, and any level-headed man acquainted with their meanderings might come to the just conclusion that Irene had been kidnapped in mistake for Mrs. Haxton. He might have deplored the blunder, but, leaving out of count any humane consideration for the girl's feelings, he must have admired the stage-craft displayed by her abductors. If cool skill were worthy of success they had earned it in full measure. In fact, the achievement would have ranked high in the villainous annals of Massowah were it not for the blind chance that separated Mulai Hamed from Royson two hours earlier.

The sun sank behind the highlands of Abyssinia while the Effendi awaited the Governor's return in the guard-room of the fort. Thereupon his guide, being an orthodox Mahomedan, faced towards Mecca, knelt by the roadside, and bowed his forehead in the dust. Another devout follower of the Prophet joined him, and the two chanted their prayers in unison. It is said that hymns are seldom sung with

such gusto as in convict settlements, and, appraised by this standard, Mulai Hamed and his casual companion were accomplished rascals, for they rattled off the Salât and the Sunnah unctuously, and performed the genuflections and prostrations of the Rêka with military precision.

Then they exchanged news. Mulai Hamed, telling of the Giaours in the hotel, was vastly surprised to hear from his brother Mussulman, a cook in the fort, that two of the Effendis were prisoners. But the cook soon hastened away to decapitate certain skinny fowls which would form the basis of a Risotto al pollastro for dinner at the officer's mess, leaving Mulai Hamed to wonder if, perhaps, the tall Effendi had also been kept in durance vile, until he saw Mr. Fenshawe and Royson being whirled off in the Governor's carriage along the sea front.

He cursed both of them in suitable terms, and started on the long walk to the hotel. Being a born gossip, he chose the livelier route of the main street, which might yield a meeting with another acquaintance. This divergence led him near the Elephant Mosque. Abdullah, wearied of the rendezvous arranged by Mrs. Haxton for von Kerber, detected Mulai Hamed's badge, and sought information.

"Brother," said he, "I would have speech of thee."

"Say on," was the courteous reply, for Mulai Hamed was flattered at being addressed thus by a man of distinction.

"There be certain Giaours at thy caravanserai, an

old man, a fat man like a bull, a young man who stands more than a cubit high, and a thin man, the Hakim Effendi, whom I await here. Hast thou any knowledge of them?"

Mulai Hamed checked the list carefully.

"It must be," said he at last, "that the Hakim Effendi is in jail, for the others I have seen, but not him."

Abdullah was annoyed. He, a pure-blooded Bedouin of the desert, had already made a great concession in using the word "brother" to one of mixed race.

"I asked not for folly," he muttered. "That is the answer of a drunken Frank."

"Nay, friend, I speak truly. May I never drink at the White Pond of the Prophet if I have not told thee even that which I have heard."

Abdullah swallowed his wrath, listened to Mulai Hamed's story, and was convinced. Notwithstanding Mrs. Haxton's prohibition, it was now essential that he should see her without delay, so he accompanied the deputy assistant hall-porter in the direction of the hotel. As they went, they met a rickety closed carriage being driven at a furious rate down a side street, and both men thought it was making for the mile-long causeway which connects the island of Massowah with the mainland.

"Who travels in such a hurry?" asked Abdullah, looking after the swaying vehicle.

"Perchance a *kafila* starts for the interior to-night,"

said Mulai Hamed. But the turmoil in the vicinity of the hotel now drew their attention, and they ran with others, for public blood-letting is ever an attractive pastime to those who form the audience.

Dick was then leaving the telegraph-office, whence he had despatched a cablegram on his own account. Bare civility demanded that he should acknowledge Mr. Forbes's various communications, so he sent the brief message: "Writing, Royson," which, he thought, covered the ground sufficiently. Before rejoining Mr. Fenshawe and Irene, he walked a little way towards the harbor, and, as he half expected, met Stump returning from the yacht.

He proceeded to astonish that stout mariner with the evening's budget, but Stump had been thinking things out in his own fashion, and he set forth a theory which apparently accounted for von Kerber's discomfiture.

"You see, it's this way," said he. "These bloomin' I-talians have got the griffin about that treasure. And who gev' it to 'em? Why, that chap who arranged the hold-up at Marseilles. You said nothin' much about it, which was right an' proper, but Tagg is sharper'n he looks, an' he tole me that a paper was nicked out of von Kerber's pocket. That paper put the sharks on the scent. They got ahead of the *Aphrodite* by catchin' the Indian mail at Brindisi, an' had everything cut an' dried for us when we dropped anchor here. Miss Irene an' me spotted one of 'em watchin' the hotel this afternoon."

"I believe that man was Alfieri," said Dick. "Indeed, Mrs. Haxton admitted it to me, and it was his unexpected appearance that caused her to beat a retreat."

"An' who's Mr. Alfie Wot's-his-name?" broke in Stump.

"I'm sorry. I forgot that you had not heard of him. He is the man who secured the papyrus, or paper, at Marseilles. Both Mrs. Haxton and the Baron are afraid of him."

"You seem to know a dooce of a lot about this business," exclaimed the skipper testily.

"I cannot help that — I have been dragged into it in many ways, each peculiar, and hardly credible when considered collectively. I promise you, captain, that I shall tell you the whole story one of these days. Meanwhile, I think that the sooner we are at Aden the better it will be for Mr. Fenshawe and the ladies, and I offer you the respectful advice that you should back up Miss Fenshawe if she tries to persuade her grandfather to go there at once."

"Funny thing," growled Stump, "but them's Mrs. Haxton's very words as I helped her up the ship's ladder. Hello! Where's the fire? Unless I'm much mistaken, young feller, there's a first-class row goin' on outside our bloomin' café. No, no, don't you butt in among Arabs as though you was strollin' down Edgware Road on a Saturday night, an' get mixed up in a coster rough-an'-tumble. These long-legged swine would knife you just for the fun of it. Keep full an'

by, an' let any son of a gun who comes too near have it where it'll stop him."

Stump's sound precautions were unnecessary. None of the combatants approached them. Indeed, the struggle ceased as quickly as it began, and they were in the hotel before the frightened servants dared make known the thrilling fact that the young lady was missing. The negro who accompanied her down-stairs was positive that she had gone off of her own accord in the carriage that was standing outside, but Mr. Fenshawe's frantic protestations when the scared manager told him what had happened convinced Royson that the servant's statement was wildly absurd. Moreover, it became clearer each second that Mrs. Haxton, and not Irene, was the prize sought by the marauders. Royson, though in a white heat of helpless rage, soon became alive to this element in an otherwise inexplicable outrage, and endeavored to soothe Mr. Fenshawe's wild-eyed alarm by telling him the girl would surely be sent back as soon as the error was discovered.

There was no time for explanations. All was panic and useless running to and fro. A messenger was sent to summon the police, and matters were in a state of chaos when Royson was approached by an Arab whose clearly-chiseled features, arched eyebrows and high cheek-bones showed that he was of different lineage to the hybrids of the coast. His carriage, too, was that of a man of consequence, and he wore his burnous rather in the Algerian style. This was Abdullah, who had gathered from the negro's now almost incoherent

words that Mrs. Haxton had been spirited away in the carriage. He had his own reasons for believing that the lady would encounter difficulties in Massowah, and the man spoke her name readily, whereas Miss Fenshawe's was unknown to either of them.

"Monsieur," said he, addressing Dick quietly in excellent French, "can you ride?"

"Yes," said Dick, hoping against hope that this calm-eyed stranger might be able to give him some sorely needed clue as to the manner, at least, of Irene's capture.

"Come with me, then," continued Abdullah, in the same guarded tone. "I think I may be able to find out where Madame has been taken."

"You can demand your own reward if you speak truly," said Dick. "Let me bring you to Mr. Fenshawe. He will tell you —"

"I seek the aid of none but you," whispered Abdullah. "I come to you only because you are a European, and I must have some one to justify me lest trouble should arise. I am unknown here, and my words would fall on deaf ears. You look like a man who can handle affairs. Come, monsieur, we are losing time."

"But I must tell my friends."

"No, that is not to be thought of, monsieur. If I am right, you and I alone must deal with this affair. These others are excited. They will shout their news to the whole bazaar. And, if we fail, we shall return in half an hour. Not a word to any one, but follow me."

Abdullah had the air of a man who knew his own mind. He strode away at once without looking to right or left, and Royson yielded to the impulse which bade him not hesitate but accept the proffered assistance in the search for Irene. Action of any sort was preferable to a maddening wait for tardy officialdom, so he hastened after the Arab.

The latter turned into the first side street. The absence of lamps, and a thin stratum of smoke clinging to the surface of the ground, made the gloom almost impenetrable, but Abdullah kept on with unhesitating steps, and Royson walked behind him rather than risk the chance of colliding with the strange shapes of men and animals which often loomed up abruptly out of the void.

In a few minutes the smoke-cloud cleared, and he found that they had reached the outskirts of the native quarter. The houses were no longer huddled together; small hovels took the place of cramped and lofty tenements. Soon he could see dark masses of hills silhouetted against the sky, where its dense blue merged into the amber and green of the last flicker of daylight. Not far distant, a sheet of water, still as a mirror, reflected sky and hills in even more pronounced chiaroscuro, and he had just distinguished the straight black ridge of the landward causeway when Abdullah dived into a wattle-built hut.

The Arab had not uttered a syllable during their rapid walk, and Royson determined not to question him, since his offer of help was made voluntarily, and

he seemed to prefer silence to speech. The Englishman was undecided whether or not to enter the hut, which was apparently untenanted, but the eager whinny of a horse quickly explained Abdullah's disappearance. There was some stamping of unshod hoofs on the hard earth, some straining of girths and clink of steel, and the Arab led forth a slenderly built animal which, at first sight, seemed to be far too light for a rider of Dick's proportions.

The horse's owner, however, showed no misgivings on this point. He handed the bridle to Dick.

"*Attendez ici un moment, s'il vous plaît, monsieur,*" he said, and ran off towards another hut. The horse tried to follow its master, and Royson found distraction for a jumble of incoherent thoughts in the need there was to restrain its fretfulness. The animal was afraid of him; in all probability it had never before been handled by a European, but Dick spoke to it in the *lingua franca* of the stable, and he was soon allowed to stroke the arched neck and twine his fingers in the thick yellow mane.

Abdullah did not return so speedily as was his intent. He had gone to borrow another mount, and met with delay, because the owner was in the bazaar. But fortune helped him by sending the man back earlier than usual for the evening meal, and when he cantered up after an absence of ten minutes, he lost no more time.

"You are sure you can ride well, monsieur?" he demanded.

"Quite sure."

"Into the saddle, then, and let the reins hang loose. Moti will carry you safely, and it is but a broken road over the bridge."

Away they went, crossing some rough ground at an easy gallop, and Dick had his first experience of the remarkable sure-footedness of the Arab horse in his proper environment. Moti moved with the long lope of a greyhound, and used eyes and intelligence as well as feet. The pace set by Abdullah on the uneven causeway seemed to be dangerous, and would have brought down any animals but those accustomed to stone-strewn valleys or deserts in which patches of soft sand alternate with bare rock. When the mainland was reached, Royson rode alongside his companion.

"Where are we going?" he inquired.

"To a village. It is not far distant. There we may obtain news."

They pressed on. Were it not for the nature of his errand, Dick would have enjoyed the ride greatly, for the current of cool air was pleasing after the heat of Massowah, and Moti carried him as though he were a feather-weight. But his heart was too care-laden to enter into the spirit of the adventure. Of all the queer incidents of an eventful day this gallop into an unknown land was the queerest. He could not help asking himself if he had done right. Yet the reassuring answer came instantly. He had left indecision behind when he agreed to the Arab's conditions, and it was surely better to try whatever fixed plan the other had in mind

than remain in Massowah, a prey to hopeless, purposeless agony. For he knew now what it would mean to him if Irene Fenshawe were reft from his life, and the knowledge made his eyes blaze, and sent the passionate blood coursing through his veins.

"Easily, monsieur. This is the place."

The Arab's strong, somewhat harsh, voice, though pitched in a key not meant to reach too far, brought Royson back to his senses. Imitating his guide, he tightened the reins and pulled Moti to a walk. Then he made another discovery. They were on a Government road, which happened, at that point, to have a smooth surface, and Moti stumbled disgracefully, for your true desert Arab will fall over himself when he no longer needs to exercise his wits in order to keep his feet.

Behind a tumble-down hut a fire was blazing. Some men were squatted around a tripod which supported a large iron pot. One was speaking, and even Royson's untrained ear recognized the measured cadence of the story-teller. A rumble of laughter showed that the protest of some discomfited rogue or some wise moullah's saw had just tickled the audience when Abdullah leaped from the saddle and approached the circle.

"Peace be with you, brethren," said he, bowing gravely.

The story-teller broke off abruptly. One of the men rose and replied:

"With you be peace, brother, and the mercy of God, and His blessings."

This formula made it certain that the group near the fire were Mahomedans. "Es-salámu aleikum!" is at once the test of the believer and the "Open, Sesame!" of the desert. Abdullah was sure now of a hearing, sure even of counsel and assistance, provided that his interests did not run counter to theirs.

Royson, dismounting for the sake of Moti, watched Abdullah's face in the flickering light of the fire to learn whether or not he was receiving the expected news. He might as well have sought inspiration from the starry vault overhead. But he was not long kept in suspense. After the exchange of a few sentences with the man who had returned his salutation, Abdullah vouchsafed a brief translation.

"Not many minutes ago a carriage passed this way. It took the road to the left, where it forks, not a hundred meters distant. We must ride hard, monsieur, for the driver was flogging his beasts. Perhaps we may have good fortune."

They were up, and away, thrusting into the darkness in a fast gallop. At the parting of the roads they took the southern track, and the land almost immediately became hilly. They eased the horses somewhat during a long upward climb, but a plateau, followed by a gentle descent towards the shore, gave them a chance of mending the pace, and the wiry Arabs beneath them seemed to know that the more quickly the miles were covered the less distance would they be called on to travel.

On the level again, where the occulting beam of the

Massowah lighthouse was hidden by the buildings on the island, they unexpectedly came upon a disabled vehicle. It was tilted on the side of the road in a way that suggested a broken wheel, and a man was holding two ponies which had been taken out of the traces.

Abdullah pulled his steed almost on to its haunches, so suddenly did he draw rein. He pushed close to the horse-tender, a Somali, and a fierce dialogue broke out, which ended in the wrathful statement to Royson:

"This son of a slave says that this is not the carriage which passed me in the bazaar. I believe he is lying, but what can I do?"

Dick, meanwhile, had ascertained that the conveyance was empty. His gorge rose at the thought that Irene might be near him at that moment, yet prevented by some ruffian from making known her presence. The belief was torturing; it impelled him to a deed which, in calmer mood, he would have declared foreign to his nature.

Handing Moti to Abdullah's care, he went so near to the driver, a man of powerful build, that he could look into his sullen face. With a quickness born of many a bout with the gloves, he seized the Somali by the wrists, causing him to let go the ponies' bridles. Then, heedless of struggles and oaths, he backed him a little space, threw him off his feet, and three times whirled him through the air around his head. It was an exhibition of strength that forced a cry of amazement even from Abdullah.

"Now tell him," said Dick, when the panting and

terrified native was allowed to stand upright again, "tell him that if he does not speak the truth, I shall take him by the ankles and beat out his brains against the rocks in that same way."

"By the Holy Kaaba!" chuckled Abdullah, "that would be worth seeing."

He conquered his desire sufficiently to put the threat into blood-curdling Arabic, and the Somali whined that he was a poor man, who only obeyed orders, but, if the god-like Nazarene would spare his life, he was ready to tell all he knew.

"Speak, then, and quickly," growled Abdullah, "for the Effendi understands thee not, and he may lose patience."

The driver stammered something which almost roused the Arab to excitement.

"Throw that dog aside, monsieur," he cried. "They are taking the lady to a boat. The place agreed for the meeting is yet nearly a thousand meters in front. Let us see what our horses can do."

They were off before he had finished speaking, but Abdullah smiled as he rode.

"Bismillah!" he muttered, "that is a fine trick. I must learn it."

On through the night they went, and happily the broken land receded here a little from the shore, leaving the road straight and fairly visible.

They had gone half a mile or more, and Royson was beginning to fear that either the Somali had been daring enough to mislead them or that Irene's guards

had been warned by the noise of their advance and were crouching behind a clump of reeds until they passed, when Abdullah lifted a restraining hand, and slackened pace.

Though the night was clear, and neighboring objects were quite discernible, Royson failed to pierce the further darkness. He strained his eyes, but could see nothing, while the Arab seemed to have a sixth sense which warned him that there were others near. They pulled up, and listened. Dick could hear only the labored breathing of their horses, yet Abdullah was evidently satisfied that their long chase was drawing to an end.

"Bear to the left, monsieur," he whispered. "They are there, by the water's edge. When I give the word, ride apart lest they fire at us, though they will hardly dare do that, lest we might prove to be soldiers from the garrison. Are you armed?"

"Sufficiently," said Dick grimly.

He felt able to tear any one limb from limb who resisted him. Once sure of his quarry, he would give short shrift. So they crept on, until the Arab shouted "Now!" and started off at a canter. Dick realized that the circling movement was best, as it suggested an attack in force, so he took a slight détour. He was closing in again before he perceived some irregular shadows, showing black against the translucent film of smooth water. That sufficed. He thundered on ahead of Abdullah, who, perhaps, thought it advisable to leave this final development in the hands of a Euro-

pean. There was a scurry among a small knot of men on the beach. A sharp hail was answered at a considerable distance from the sea. Royson rode with such furious speed that he now made out a white-robed female figure struggling in the grasp of a man attired in the burnous and hood of a coast Arab.

"Is that you, Miss Fenshawe?" he roared.

At the sound of an English voice three men scattered and fled like rabbits, but the fourth, he who clutched the woman, set her at liberty and drew a long knife. He bellowed forth some order, and another shout came from the sea. Then he poised himself ready to strike. Royson was within a horse's length, leaning forward in the saddle, when he caught the gleam of the uplifted weapon. At the same instant he recognized Irene, and saw that she was gagged, and her hands were tied behind her back. But her feet were free, and she deliberately kicked the Arab's ankle, thereby disconcerting his murderous thrust and nearly bringing him to the ground.

Then Royson's clenched fist fell like a sledge-hammer on his adversary's skull, and the man collapsed with a broken neck. Moti, well named "the Pearl," seemed to play this sort of game with the skill that a trained polo-pony shows in following the ball. He stopped almost of his own accord, wheeled, and allowed Dick to lift the girl in his arms.

Abdullah, who did not attempt to pursue the others, had not failed to note the rapid approach of a boat.

"Quick, now, monsieur," he said. "Make for the road!"

As they cantered off they heard some shouting in Arabic, and a few words of Italian, but Dick was looking into Irene's eyes. He was conscious only that he held her in a close embrace. His heart was thumping against his ribs. For one who had proved himself cool in an emergency he betrayed all the symptoms of unusual excitement.

"Are you uninjured?" he asked, with a marvelous tenderness in his voice, while his lips were very near to her swathed cheek.

She nodded. He fancied he caught a smile in her eyes. He did not know how lover-like was his clasp.

"We shall stop soon and release your bonds," he whispered. "Thank God I was able to find you."

Again he believed she smiled, but those beautiful brown eyes of hers seemed to fill with tears. He set his teeth, and breathed hard, but he was too wary to jeopardize success by halting until all danger of pursuit had disappeared. Then he pulled up, dismounted, and lifted Irene to the ground. She was gagged so tightly that he had to exercise some care in cutting the knotted strips of linen which bound her face and head. A piece of coarse sacking had been thrust into her mouth, and she scarce had the power to utter a word when the brutal contrivance was withdrawn.

"Oh, Mr. Royson," she managed to gasp, "how can I thank you!"

"By not trying to talk until you feel better," said

Dick. "There is a village not far away, and we should at least obtain some water there."

He was bending over her wrists in his anxiety not to hurt her unduly while he severed a stout rope, and he could not see the expression of sheer bewilderment which again mastered the usually impassive features of Abdullah. The Arab had yielded to unwonted surprise when he saw Royson use a man as flail, but the removal of the gag, and the consequent revelation of Irene's identity, nearly stupefied him.

"May jackals defile my grave," he muttered, "but this is the wrong woman! Here have I, Abdullah the Spear-thrower, been befooled by a black slave in the caravanserai. What have I done? By the beard of the Prophet, what shall I say if her capture was part of the Hakim Effendi's plan?"

CHAPTER X

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

When Irene was freed from her bonds she sighed deeply, uttered a little sob as though her soul had fluttered to her lips, and sank into Royson's arms. In the ever-growing darkness he had not realized earlier how acute was the torture she was enduring. She must have experienced some difficulty in breathing, owing to the outrageous manner in which her mouth and nostrils were covered. Yet, to render her quite helpless, her wrists were tied with such cruel force that they became swollen and stiff, and her delicate skin was chafed until it galled beneath the rope.

While Royson was carrying her on the high-peaked Arab saddle, the strain grew almost intolerable; but her brave heart did not flinch under that exquisite pain. Though she could not speak, she strove to reward him with a valiant smile, and even conquered the gush of tears that gave momentary tribute to her agony.

And now she lay in a dead faint, pallid and inert, while Royson said bitter things about Alfieri. He blamed the Italian for all this mad business, and vowed harsh vengeance on him if ever they met again. He was quite unable to help Irene. He had less than

the average man's vague knowledge of the right treatment to adopt under such conditions. He imagined that the hands and face of a fainting woman should be bathed in water, and was about to take her back to the shore when Abdullah intervened.

"It is nothing, monsieur," said he, with true Eastern nonchalance where the opposite sex was concerned. "Her head and arms ache now that her bonds are removed. If Allah wills it, she should revive presently. And we cannot remain here. Whether she live or die let us go on, in God's name."

Despite the flurry of his new predicament, the Englishman caught a hint of petulance in the Arab's tone. It denoted a change of attitude that was all the more surprising when contrasted with the man's previous eagerness to serve him. But there was sound sense in the advice thus gruffly tendered. He managed to remount by tucking the girl's swaying form under his left arm. Then he pillowed her head on his shoulder, and, letting the horse walk, strove to rub her hands. Fortunately, Moti did not stumble. Perhaps the weight of a double burthen suggested the need of care, but, whatever the explanation of the animal's excellent behavior, they reached the broken-down carriage without accident. The driver had gone off with his pair of ponies, but Abdullah, ruefully making the best of a perplexing situation, searched under the box seat for the porous earthenware jar of water which is often carried there in the East. By good hap, he found one, nearly half full.

"Here," he muttered impatiently, "let her drink some of this, and pour the rest over her head and hands. Then the cold air will freshen her. And be quick, monsieur! Those who follow will not wait on ceremony."

Royson substituted a soaked handkerchief for Abdullah's drastic remedy, but he soon had the satisfaction of seeing Irene's lips move. Then, after testing the water to make sure it was drinkable, he gave her a mouthful, and, within a few seconds, she was in partial possession of her senses. Nevertheless, for an appreciable time, her gallant spirit flagged. She tried feebly to brush the wet strands of hair out of her eyes.

"Why are we stopping here?" she moaned. "Please take me home. I am so tired — and thirsty — and my mouth hurts me. Where is the yacht? What are we doing here?"

"I thought she would recover soon," broke in Abdullah. "Now, monsieur, at all costs we must reach the town. The hour grows late. Ride on!"

It was remarkable, to say the least, that one who was willing to face unknown odds in order to effect the girl's rescue should be so desperately anxious now to get away from a rather improbable pursuit. Yet again, the Arab's suggestion offered the only practicable course, and Moti had to bear a double load while they slowly climbed the hill down which they dashed so precipitately before they came upon the disabled vehicle. This time, Dick managed to seat his fair partner more comfortably. He placed himself well back against the

cantle, lifted Irene across his knees, and drew her right arm around his neck.

Once more she sighed. Dick feared it was the preliminary to another collapse, until she whispered in delightful confidence:

"I remember now, Mr. Royson. I suppose I fainted. How good you are to me!"

"Now, may Heaven be praised that you are all right again," breathed Dick fervently. "You gave me the biggest sort of fright when you nearly dropped on the road."

"Have we far to go before we reach the hotel?"

"Several miles. It took us about three-quarters of an hour to overtake you, and we came at a rare pace."

"I am sure I must be making your arm ache."

She tried to straighten herself, and Royson missed the warm fragrance of her hair against his cheek.

"I really think you ought not to move," said he, with an affectation of brotherly solicitude that did him credit.

"Well, if I am not wearying you," she murmured, and the pretty head nestled contentedly on his shoulder. Then, it may be, she thought that if necessity demanded this lover-like pose, she ought to redeem its literalness by conversation.

"Who is your Arab friend who speaks French so well?" she asked. "It *was* French I heard, was it not? And how in the world did you manage to find out where I was taken to?"

"You must thank our companion for that. I

happened to meet Stump near the telegraph-office, and we saw a disturbance in the main street near the hotel. We hurried up, little imagining that it affected you, and several precious minutes elapsed before we discovered that you were missing. Mr. Fenshawe —"

"Ah, poor, darling grandad! I hardly dare ask you how he bore it. I grieved more for him than for myself. You see, I knew it was all a wretched mistake. Those horrid men meant to carry off Mrs. Haxton."

"I gathered as much from what Mr. Fenshawe said. Of course, he was very greatly distressed, but, if matters go well with us now, you will be restored to him in another hour."

"I have no fear of anything when you are near, Mr. Royson. Something told me that long ago. And that is why I was vexed with you for leaving me this afternoon."

Dick's heart gave a great throb of joy, and his voice was somewhat husky as he answered:

"I could not help myself. The Italian whom you and Captain Stump noticed in the street was Alfieri. Mrs. Haxton saw him, too, and I would never have believed that terror could alter a woman's face as it altered hers. She begged of me to find von Kerber, and warn him, and I thought, perhaps foolishly, that if I obeyed her wishes it might bring about the very thing you and I most desire."

Irene did not reply immediately. She felt unaccountably timid.

"It is stupid of me, but I do not quite follow your meaning," she volunteered at last.

"Well, you are anxious that this expedition should be abandoned, and I ought to return to England, where I am in great demand, it seems, after some years of scandalous neglect."

"Oh!" she said. "Is that it?"

There was another pause.

"But the fact that Mrs. Haxton, and not I, should be sitting here so — so confidentially — does not explain how it comes about, does it?" she went on.

"I was so interested in what you were saying that I lost the thread of my story. We were listening to an excited jabber of nonsense in the hotel — for instance, one of the negro servants said you went away of your own free will — and wondering what on earth we could do, when this genii of an Arab came to me in a mysterious way, and led me straight on your track. Shall we bid him discourse?"

"Oh, please do. It is all so wonderful. I could see through the open windows of that hateful carriage when we crossed the causeway and went off to the left into a wild country. I gave up hope then. Your appearance on the beach was an actual miracle, to my thinking."

"Just one word before we tackle our guide," whispered Dick, bringing his lips as near hers as he dared. "Though it was dark enough down there by the water, I saw you lash out at that fellow with the knife at precisely the right moment."

"Don't, don't!" she cried, shuddering, and lifting her eyes to his in a fleeting upward glance. "I hope I shall soon forget those few awful seconds. I knew he meant to stab you, and I wanted to scream, but could not. He seemed to be the leader of the party, and he flew into such a rage when the wheel gave way that I really believe he was ready to kill me out of spite. You knocked him down, didn't you? It may be wicked, but I hope you hit him hard."

"Yes," said Dick, "I think your score is paid in that instance."

Her head was bent, and she could not see the grim smile on his lips. It was an odd thing to remember at that moment, but he recalled the fact that his famous ancestor could fell a bullock with his clenched fist.

Abdullah, when given the opportunity, was readier to ply them with questions than to answer theirs. He said his name was "El Jaridiah," which was true enough, this being the title he bore among his fellow-tribesmen. He also explained that he met Mulai Hamed, and happened to see the direction taken by the vehicle when it dashed clear of the scrimmage in the street. But he modestly disclaimed any special credit for his share in subsequent events, stating that he had many friends among the European colony at Cairo, and was naturally willing to help a lady against the thievish dogs who inhabited Massowah.

Yet Dick added a third to these two earlier subtle enigmas in "El Jaridiah's" characteristics when he heard the Arab's unfeigned pleasure at the statement

that it was not the lady actually rescued, but a friend of hers, whom the thievish dogs aforesaid meant to carry off. Abdullah then saw a path out of the thorny labyrinth which beset him. It was evident that in serving Miss Fenshawe he had displayed his fidelity to Mrs. Haxton! The notion was so gratifying that he made a suggestion which assuredly would not otherwise have occurred to him. When they reached the camp-fire where they were supplied with such valuable information on their outward journey, he would obtain some goat's milk for Madame, he said, and that would not only restore her strength but go far towards alleviating the soreness caused by the gag.

He kept his promise. The milk was brought in a dubious vessel, but the girl vowed she never tasted a more delicious beverage. They resumed their march, Irene's head dropped cozily to the region of Dick's heart, and that wayward organ thumped again in the most alarming way.

Once the causeway was crossed, Abdullah called a halt.

"This road leads into the main street, monsieur," said he to Royson. "It is quite near. If the lady is able to walk to the hotel, it will attract less attention than riding. Meanwhile, I can take the horses to their stables, and hasten in advance to tell your friends that you are safe."

They agreed instantly. Royson did not forget to pat the plucky little Arab that had carried him to the Gates of Eden, and Irene said that if it were feasible

she would buy Moti and have him sent to England. And thus they parted from Abdullah, thinking to meet him again five minutes later.

But their next encounter with the Spear-thrower was destined to take place under strange conditions. His present intent was to slip away and seek an interview with Mrs. Haxton, as he had managed to worm out the information that she was on board the yacht. The last thing he desired was to be dragged into prominence. Though he had not been taught that a man might "do good by stealth and blush to find it fame," he was specially anxious that his action of that night should not be trumpeted forth in every ear.

Long before they gained the main thoroughfare, both Royson and Irene were conscious of many prying eyes. Not a few passers-by yielded frankly to curiosity and followed them. The girl, of course, was hatless. Her dress of fine muslin was of a style and texture seldom seen in Massowah, and if the rare beauty of her face could excite comment in Hyde Park it would surely not pass unnoticed in a small and semi-barbarous Red Sea port.

Royson, too, though his white drill uniform was familiar enough to the public, was out of keeping with his surroundings. He towered among the puny Italians; not a stalwart negro nor gaunt Arab in the throng could equal him in stature and physique.

So they both agreed in thinking that they were much more at ease when Moti was carrying them along the dark road of the mainland than now while

hurrying through the packed and dimly-lighted streets. But the sensation they created in the bazaar was as naught compared with the overwhelming effect of their arrival in the Grand Hotel of the Universe. Two officers of gendarmerie and a round dozen of soldier-policemen became incoherent at sight of them. The hotel manager nearly wept with joy. He tumbled up-stairs, tripping not once but several times, in his eagerness to make known to the English milord that the Signorina Fenshawe had returned. The vestibule filled in the most amazing way with a crowd that seemed to speak all languages under the sun. Mr. Fenshawe rushed to the head of the stairs as soon as he grasped the meaning of the manager's dramatic announcement, and a combined "Ah!" of gratification gushed from a hundred throats when Irene flung herself into his arms. Clearly, this affair had stirred Massowah to its depths. It would supply food for gossip during many a day. That long drawn-out "Ah!" was, in some sense, a testimony to Abdullah's wisdom.

While Irene was sobbing her joy on her grandfather's breast, Stump crushed a broad track through the ever-increasing mob until he reached Royson.

"I was bettin' on you from the minnit I missed you," he roared genially. "You're a fair wonder, an' no mistake. By Gad, how did you manage it? The Governor has raised the whole crimson town, I will say that for him. I don't know his lingo, but I rather fancy he swore to have a scalp for every hair on Miss Irene's head if she didn't turn up afore daylight.

Where was she? Who took her off? The police are huntin' for your friend Alfie this hour an' more."

Stump 's concluding item was at once gratifying and puzzling.

"How did they come to suspect him?" asked Dick, ignoring the rest of his commander's outburst.

"Mrs. Haxton put 'em on his track. You see, it was this way. I sent the jolly-boat's crew back to the yacht with orders that Tagg was to arm every mother's son on board, an' be ready for action when Mr. Fenshawe gev the word. The old man wasn't half mad, I can tell you. I take my solemn davy he'd have stormed that bloomin' fort to-morrow mornin'. Mrs. Haxton heard about the trouble, an' wrote a note sayin' as how that Dago we saw to-day was at the bottom of the whole dam business. She tole Mr. Fenshawe to demand von Kerber's release. He was the on'y man who could handle Alfie, she said, an', wot between our commodore's threat to land an armed force, an' the red-hot cables he's bin sendin' to London an' Rome, sink me if the Governor isn't scared to death."

"Is the Baron at liberty, then?"

"Not yet. There's no knowin' wot might have happened if you'd kep away another hour or two. The ole man has raised Cain, I can tell you. But, look here, I'm doin' all the talkin', an' it ain't fair."

"Did no one tell you a few minutes ago that Miss Fenshawe had escaped and was hurrying here with me?"

"Ax me another," growled Stump. Then he eyed Royson critically. "I know wot's wrong with you," he went on. "You're light-headed for want of a drink. Come out of it. Damme, you need lubricatin'!"

They went to the upper floor, and Mr. Fenshawe hurried to grasp Dick's hand.

"I will not endeavor to thank you now," he said brokenly. "My gratitude is too deep for words, but — believe me, Mr. Royson — if I had lost my little girl — it would have killed me."

The hotel manager came to Dick's relief. With a face all wrinkled in a satisfied grin, he informed them that "dinner was now served." The poor man had been waiting two hours to make that announcement, and Irene's gleeful appreciation of this low comedy close to the night's adventures showed that she was little the worse either in health or spirits. She would not hear of a doctor's being summoned. She assured her grandfather that soreness of lips and wrists would not impair her appetite, but she hoped that the dinner would not be utterly spoiled if it were delayed two minutes longer — she had actually forgotten to bring forward the Arab who had helped Mr. Royson to rescue her!

Yet, search as they might, El Jaridiah was not to be found. None knew him, nor had any news of the girl's safety been received until she was seen in the vestibule. Though mystified, they were far too excited to pay special heed to the circumstance at the time. Both Irene and Royson believed that the man

was detained by some slight difficulty with regard to the horses, one of which, they knew, was borrowed. They said that surely he would come to the hotel ere dinner was ended. But he came not. The only interruption to a lively meal was supplied by the Governor, who showed very proper official horror when he heard the story of Irene's abduction, and saw the evidences of the rough usage to which she had been subjected.

He was so urbane and apologetic, and promised such impartial punishment both for the persons who inspired the outrage and for those who actually carried it out, that Mr. Fenshawe deferred to the morrow the stern protest he meant to register against von Kerber's detention. It was quite true, as Stump told Royson, that strongly-worded cablegrams were despatched to London and Rome earlier in the evening. Diplomatic representations would certainly be made in both capitals, and the yacht-owner felt that the local authorities would now leave matters entirely to the Italian Colonial Minister.

So a truce was proclaimed Before he left them, the Governor drank to Miss Fenshawe's health in the best champagne that the Grand Hotel of the Universe could produce.

The four people rose from their belated meal at half past ten. A sailor came from the *Aphrodite* in response to a message sent by Stump announcing Miss Fenshawe's return. The jolly-boat was waiting to take them on board, he said, and they walked to the

jêtée, escorted by the whole body of gens d'armes who had mounted guard at the hotel.

The long pull across the starlit waters of the harbor was peculiarly refreshing and restful after the thrilling events of the day. Irene said with a laugh that it was almost worth while being kidnapped for the sake of becoming a heroine, and Mr. Fenshawe yielded to the soothing influence of the hour in expressing the opinion that he expected to hear of the Baron's unconditional release early next day.

"By the way," said the girl, speaking to the boatswain, "how was Mrs. Haxton when you left the yacht?"

"She was all right, miss, when I saw her about nine o'clock. She was just goin' ashore —"

"Going ashore!" For the life of her, Irene could not help the blank wonderment of that repetition.

"Yes, miss. An Arab kem for her."

"Are you sure?"

"Sartin, miss. It was about two bells when that craft hailed us — wasn't it, Bill?"

The sailor thus unexpectedly appealed to was taken by surprise. He nearly swallowed a quid of tobacco before he answered:

"That's correct. It struck two bells just arter they shoved off."

"Do you know where Mrs. Haxton meant to go? I mean, was she making for the hotel?"

"I didn't happen to hear, miss. But Mr. Tagg was talkin' to the lady. P'raps he can tell you."

From the silence prevailing among her companions Irene was aware that they were as much astounded by the man's statement as she herself. It was impossible to discuss the matter further in front of the boat's crew, but the girl whispered to Royson, who was sitting near her:

"Did you ever hear anything more amazing? She could not have missed us. What can be her object in going off alone?"

"We may be able to answer those questions, and others, when we find out who it was that came for her."

"Some Arab, the man says. How strange that Mrs. Haxton should be acquainted with an Arab in Massowah!"

Mr. Fenshawe bent towards them.

"Do not forget," he said in a low voice, "that Mrs. Haxton may not have heard earlier of von Kerber's arrest. I am inclined to think that he has managed to communicate with her in some manner. A curious letter I received to-day may throw light on the problem. I was reading it when that hotel man burst in on me with the news of your escapade, Irene. To tell the truth, I have not given much thought to it since."

Royson was convinced that Mrs. Haxton, finding the game was up, had flown. But Tagg's version of the lady's sudden departure did not lend color to this view. He stated that a shore boat came alongside a few minutes before nine o'clock, and an Arab, who was its sole passenger, stood up and said clearly:

"Me Abdullah. See Madame Haxton."

That, seemingly, was the full extent of the man's English. He repeated the sentence until Tagg sent Miss Fenshawe's maid to tell Mrs. Haxton that an Arab named Abdullah was asking for her.

"She kem at once," said Tagg, "an' they began to parleyvoo as quick as you like —"

"They spoke French?" broke in Irene, with a side-long glance at Dick. The far-fetched notion which gripped him instantly had also occurred to the girl.

"Yes, miss. You can allus tell French by the mongin' an' bongin' an' tongin' that goes on."

At another time Irene would have hailed Tagg's subtle humor with glee, but there was an element of deadly earnest in the history of the past few hours that kept her strictly to the issue.

"This Arab —" she said, "was he a tall, good-looking man with a striped hood to his burnous, his outer cloak, you know?"

"That's him," agreed Tagg. "More like a fellow you'd see at Tangier than in these parts. You know the sort of chap I mean, cap'n?"

"I do," said Stump. "Reg'lar stage Arabs, they are. Sort of Frenchified, with clipped whiskers."

"But please tell me what happened," cried Irene breathlessly.

"Well, miss, there ain't much to tell. They had a serious confab for five minutes, an' then she tells me she's goin' ashore. 'Wot time will ye be back, m'am, an' I'll send a boat,' sez I. 'I dunno,' sez she, 'I may be late, so I shall return in a native boat.' She axed

your maid, miss, to bring a wrap from her cabin, an' she was gone without another word."

"Then that settles it," interposed Mr. Fenshawe dryly. "Mrs. Haxton is a lady who knows her own mind. She is fully qualified to take care of herself. Off you go to bed, Irene. Sufficient for the day is the excitement thereof. And, according to present indications, we shall be kept busy to-morrow. Good-night, Mr. Royson. I shall be better able to thank you in the morning."

Irene, too, held out a hand to Dick.

"I'm making up all sorts of nice compliments to offer you," she said pleasantly. "You need not protest. I was gagged for the best part of an hour when I very specially wanted to talk, so I have a whole lot of things to say after breakfast."

Dick read the meaning of the glance she flashed at him. Oddly enough, it expressed his own thought. They must endeavor to find out how Mrs. Haxton came to be such a close acquaintance of El Jaridiah's. Not only had he risked his life when he fancied she was in danger, but she, on her part, was willing to return with him to Massowah under cover of the night — to Massowah, whence she had fled in terror not many hours earlier.

CHAPTER XI

A WOMAN INTERVENES

When Mrs. Haxton descended the yacht's gangway, and seated herself in the boat which had brought Abdullah from the shore, she threw a main with fate. But she was acting with her eyes open, whereas poor mortality is oft called on to take that dangerous hazard blindfold. During several haggard hours she had weighed her prospects in the scale of judgment, and the balance was wofully unfavorable. Wealth she had none; and now she saw position slipping away also. As sure as the sun would rise next day, so sure was it, as matters stood then, that exposure and humiliation must arrive. To this hard, level-headed, shrewd woman there was no blinking the outcome of an official inquiry. Alfieri was in Massowah, Alfieri, the man she had wronged as Delilah wronged Samson. If he were arrested, owing to Irene's abduction, he would demand to be confronted with von Kerber, would ask that she, too, should be arraigned with the Austrian, and put forward such an indisputable plea that, whatever the outcome for the Italian, her English friends must recoil from her with indignation. And there was worse in store. Mr. Fenshawe's generosity

might provide the means of returning to Europe, but she would go back discredited, a mere adventuress, while the publicity attached to the yacht's errand could hardly fail to bring her name into fatal notoriety. In a word, social ruin stared her in the face, and the prospect was so unpleasing that her despairing glance turned more than once towards a dressing-case containing drugs whose labels spelt oblivion.

Then came the Arab, with news of Irene's return, and, like any desperate gamester who ventures the last shreds of a wasted capital on some almost impossible chance, she determined to fight Alfieri to the end.

It was not a thing to be done in cold blood. Unarmed men have saved their lives by boldly attacking lions, but that is no argument in favor of an unarmed man going out of his way to search for the king of beasts. And the measure of Alfieri's hate was supplied by his daring attempt to capture her. She shuddered to think of the result had he been successful, yet she nerved herself now to out-maneuver him. Of course, there were some slight elements in her favor. The blunder which had placed her enemy at loggerheads with the authorities gave her a momentary advantage. The man's lust for vengeance might, indeed, sweep aside her attack, but she must risk that. Had fate been kinder, Mrs. Haxton was cast in the mold that produces notable women. She knew when to unite boldness with calculation; she would always elect to die fighting rather than cower without a blow; and she

would never believe a cause lost while there was a man to be wheedled.

The Somali crew ferried her swiftly towards the landing-stage, and she bade Abdullah render a full account of the rescue.

"You speak of a boat," she commented, with a puzzled air. "Did you see the occupants?"

"No, madame. We heard some shouting by Italians. That is all."

"A boat!" she said, deep in thought. "That seems to suggest that I was to be brought back to the town. The hired carriage and the long drive into the country were intended to throw dust in the eyes of those who might endeavor to find me."

"Or to a ship," suggested Abdullah. "Had they a dhow in readiness? Perhaps, by this time, they may have slipped away to sea under cover of the darkness."

Mrs. Haxton laughed, but her mirth had not its wonted musical cadence.

"No," she said, "that is not likely. *Grand Dieu*, if only it were! Now, listen, and do exactly as I bid you. Somewhere in Massowah, probably in one of the small restaurants, you will find a man named Giuseppe Alfieri. You must inquire at every café and boarding house in the main street — there are not many. You cannot mistake him. You met him once at Assouan, and you may recall his appearance — he is tall and thin, with a lean, sallow face, clean shaven. He has long, black hair and his eyes are large and deeply set. When you find him, you will say that I

wish to see him. He will be surprised, and talk big, but he will surely question you. Make no secret of the fact that you are in my confidence. Tell him I offer a truce, that I am in a position to make terms. He may bluster, and boast, perhaps, that I am on my knees. Well, admit it, and remind him that where I fail, he, at least, has no chance of success. Do you understand? It is a question as between money and revenge. Alfieri is something of a fool. If the bait be tempting enough he will swallow it, and not for the first time."

Abdullah nodded with complete comprehension of her under-thought. The Italian had been tricked once. It might be possible to trick him again.

"If he agrees, Madame, when is he to meet you?"

"To-morrow morning, at eleven o'clock, at the hotel."

"But this other affair has set the bazaar in an uproar. One cannot carry off young English ladies so easily. Monsieur Alfieri may be a prisoner."

"No such luck," said Mrs. Haxton bitterly. "You are not acquainted with the twists and turns of events, Abdullah. That which was simple at Assouan has become complex here. Alfieri has inflamed the mind of some high official at Rome, or he never could have persuaded the Governor to go to such lengths as to arrest Fenshawe Effendi, not to speak of Monsieur le Baron. No, this pig of a Governor has a Minister behind him. He may threaten, but Alfieri is safe."

"Nevertheless, he may be hidden."

"That will suit me equally well. Zut! Abdullah, you are not so quick as usual to-night."

"Pardon, Madame, you have told me what I am to do, but you have said no words as to yourself, yet behold, we shall be on shore in a few minutes."

"I? I am going to the fort. I have one card to play with his Excellency. Pray to your Prophet, Abdullah, that it may succeed."

The Arab bowed silently. It might be that he stood to win, no matter who lost, in this war of intrigue.

"Do I see you again to-night, Madame?" he asked, as the boat drew alongside the jetty.

"I think not. Come with me until I obtain an alabeeyah. Then, to your search, and report to me early to-morrow."

They soon found an alabeeyah, one of the small open carriages made popular in Egypt by the French, and Mrs. Haxton was driven towards the fort. The Arab began his quest for Giuseppe Alfieri, but found him not, for the most convincing reason that Alfieri was then seated in the Governor's library, smoking the Governor's cigarettes, and drinking the Governor's best Capri.

His Excellency had just returned from the hotel. He, too, had deferred to the morning a tactful explanation that pressure of business had prevented the despatch of Mr. Fenshawe's cablegrams that night. But tact was not his most obvious gift. Though he hoped to mollify the irate yacht-owner with soft words, he did not spare Alfieri now.

"The madness of it!" he cried. "You say it was a mistake. That is the plea of a stupid child. The affair would have been just as awkward if you had carried off the Signora Haxton. She is a British subject. In two days the newspapers of Europe would magnify the incident into an international dispute, and, with Abyssinia always ready to fan the flame —"

"Believe me, Excellency, the Signora herself would have written that she had gone away of her own free will," broke in the other.

"I doubt it very much. Her friends could not fail to think that she was writing under compulsion. I tell you, idiot that you are, you have prejudiced your own case, made difficulties where they did not exist. If your sworn statements are true —"

"They are true, true as death," vociferated Alfieri.

"*Ebbene!* Why, then, strengthen your enemies by giving them just cause for complaint?"

"If only you knew what I have suffered through that woman, Excellency!" came the angry cry.

"Oh, blame the woman, of course," said the Governor, with the fine scorn of a man who has married a meek wife. "I lose patience with these transports. If a woman preferred another to me I would dance at her wedding."

"You would not dance if she had used all the arts of treachery to rob you of your fortune."

"I flatter myself I would resist the tricks of any siren who was merely anxious to delude me. But this is beside the question. These English suspect you of

planning the outrage. Frankly, I cannot see my way to meet the inquiry which must be made, sooner or later. Perhaps the old man, Fenshawe, may consent to tone down his messages to-morrow. If he refuses, and sails to Aden, the very cables will fuse under the storm of remonstrance from Rome. I may be recalled. That pig, Festiano, will be appointed in my place. The more I consider your imbecility the less am I inclined to put faith in anything you have said. How do I know that your Greek was not an addle-headed ass like yourself? *Corpo di Dio!* His treasure of Saba may be a piece of moon-madness akin to this tragi-comic plot of yours."

"I would have bent her to my will. I could make her go to this Austrian dog and tell him begone. I could force her to confess to the Englishman that she had deceived him."

"*Saetta!* I am out of temper with you," growled the Governor, lighting a cigarette and smoking furiously.

He was fond of plain speaking, this temporary ruler of Erythrea. The sudden death of a Governor appointed from Rome had given him his chance. He might be superseded at any moment by some carpet-bagger with political influence, and it went against the grain that the private feuds of people whose quarrels did not interest him in the least should be able to wreck his career. Alfieri came to him with good credentials. If the man's story was borne out by facts, not only would Italy receive a handsome sum

from a colony which had hitherto been a drain on her resources, but he, Marchetti, would reap some share of the credit, not to mention the bonus promised for his assistance. His instructions from headquarters were clear. He had acted within his rights in arresting von Kerber and detaining Mr. Fenshawe until the latter gave up an undertaking to land on Italian territory without permission. That he had decided to release the Englishman unconditionally was a further tribute to his good judgment. Having caged the hawk there was no harm in freeing the pigeon. But Alfieri's passionate and ill-advised attempt to abduct Mrs. Haxton had changed the whole aspect of affairs. No wonder the stout and pompous little man fumed and fretted in vain endeavor to climb out of this unexpected pit.

Alfieri looked at his restless companion in moody silence. In aspect, he was the exact opposite to the podgy Governor. Slender, and loosely built, he had the large, sunken eyes of a dreamer, the narrow forehead of the self-opinionated, the delicate nostrils and mobile mouth of the neurotic temperament. It was easy to see that such a man would brood over an injury, real or imagined, till he had lashed himself into a tempest of wrath. His emotions could know no mean. From sullen despair he could rebound to the most extravagant optimism. That very day he had rushed away from the painstaking details of a semi-scientific expedition in order to gratify a Sicilian impulse which called for the ruthless settlement of an old score.

Even now, the sense of failure rankled deeper than the contemptuous anger of his fellow-countryman; but the practical-minded Governor had no intent to leave matters where they stood.

"It seems to me," he said, turning suddenly on Alfieri, after gazing out across the harbor and watching the twinkling lights on the *Aphrodite*, "it seems to me that the best thing we can do now is to arrange a compromise. It is not too late. We must board the Englishman's yacht early in the morning —"

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. A servant entered. There was a lady to see his Excellency. By Bacchus, a lady, at that hour, nearly ten o'clock! Who was she, and what did she want? He could not be bothered —

Then he read the name on the card brought by the man, and whistled softly, lest perchance this latest phase of an electrical situation should demand words not in the repertory of excellencies.

"Wait outside for one moment," he said. Alfieri, alive to Signor Marchetti's suppressed excitement, wondered who the visitor could be. The governor examined the card again. He gave his companion a rather dreary smile.

"You are but a tinfoil conspirator, after all, my friend," said he. "Here is a woman who despises you."

Alfieri sprang to his feet with an oath.

"She has not dared!" he cried.

"Calm yourself, I pray you. The Signora Haxton

has come to pay a visit — that is all. The hour is late, but, from what you have told me, she is not likely to be troubled by a consideration of that kind. Now, Signor Alfieri, I am going to receive her. Do not forget that I am the chief magistrate of Massowah. It is probable that, through her instrumentality, I may be able to extricate both myself and you from the predicament into which your folly has plunged us. And I warn you that any display of temper will be fatal. Let us go slowly and we may go far."

Alfieri, all a-quiver with uncontrollable emotion, fixed his glowing eyes on the door when the servant returned with Mrs. Haxton. She entered, with the graceful ease of one accustomed to meet greater dignitaries than the head of a small Italian colony. Signor Marchetti advanced a few paces. Where a lady was concerned he could be courteous enough, his abruptness being a specially cultivated mannerism intended to impress natives with a sense of his importance. But, beneath the skin of office, he was Italian to the core, and he promised himself a fine scenic effect when the Englishwoman's glance fell on the other occupant of the room.

But Mrs. Haxton had nerved herself to play for a high stake. Though she shrank back a little and caught her breath when she saw Alfieri, there was a restraint in her attitude which might have surprised a more astute person than Governor Marchetti. Her eyes contracted somewhat, her lips tightened, a hand clutched at the folds of a cloak thrown loosely over her

shoulders. Marchetti paid heed to these things, and interpreted them as evidences of timidity. A man accustomed to wield a rapier rather than a cudgel would not have made that initial error. Alfieri's presence changed the whole situation, and Mrs. Haxton, in whom the stage had lost a great actress, instantly bent her wits to deal with the new set of circumstances thus created.

"You speak Italian, signora? Ah, capital! Pray be seated," said the Governor affably. "As you have honored me with a call at this unusual hour I take it that your business is urgent. Do you wish to confer with me in private? If so, Signor Alfieri, who is not unknown to you, I believe, will leave us for a few minutes. Otherwise, you can talk quite frankly in his presence."

That was the Governor's method of putting his two visitors at their ease. The lady would assume he knew everything. The man would take his cue from a friendly opening. What could be better?

"I am glad that Signor Alfieri is here, your Excellency, though I must admit that I did not expect to see him," said Mrs. Haxton, taking the proffered chair. "My business concerns him, to a certain extent. By all means, let him remain."

Her voice was under control. She spoke Italian fluently, and her smooth, clear accents seemed to stir strange memories in Alfieri's soul. But, thinking to annoy her, he forced a spiteful grin to his thin lips.

"Allowing for the lapse of years, Rita," he said,

"and bearing in mind your natural distress at to-day's occurrences, you are looking remarkably well."

She flashed one quick glance at him, then smiled sweetly at Marchetti.

"My distress ended when the Signorina Fenshawe was brought back to her friends. Of course, it was a dreadful thing that she should be carried off in such a way. Were it not for the skill and resource displayed by one of the *Aphrodite*'s officers, there is no knowing what the consequences might have been."

"You have seen the signorina at the hotel?" put in the Governor.

"No, I came straight from the yacht. I thought it advisable."

"But the affair has been misrepresented. It is a mere bagatelle. There exists, shall we say, a certain disagreement between you and Signor Alfieri. There was an unhappy mistake, which I would have rectified without any help from the yacht. You see, rumor is apt to exaggerate."

"I think you are taking a very reasonable and proper view, your Excellency. It will be best for all parties if we try to regard the incident in that light."

Marchetti was vaguely conscious of a too complete agreement in the lady's tone. But he seized the apparent advantage.

"Then that is settled," he said cheerfully. "I have already apologized to Signor Fenshawe. To-morrow a more ample explanation and expression of regret should remove any cause of friction."

"I have reason to think there will be no difficulty in arriving at an amicable settlement, provided you fall in with the suggestion I am here to make."

"And that is?"

"That you release the Baron von Kerber to-night."

"Ha!" snarled Alfieri, but the Governor angrily motioned him to be silent.

"No one is better aware than yourself, signora, how utterly impossible is your request," he said.

"The proposal is not even worthy of debate, then?"

"But no."

"That is a pity. My small experience of life has taught me that when two reasonable people, or even three, hold different views on any given subject, there is always something to be said in favor of each contention. Indeed, wisdom leans towards a compromise in such a case."

"You presuppose a mere divergence of opinion. Here we have no room for it. Your confederate, signora, if you will pardon a harsh term, is believed to have stolen valuable documents from my friend, Signor Alfieri. My Government has instructed me to arrest him, and to use every means, not stopping short of armed force, to prevent the *Aphrodite* from undertaking what is little else than a piratical expedition. You see, therefore, that it is not in my power, if I were so minded, to set Baron von Kerber at liberty. Compromise in any other direction would appeal to me. Where Baron von Kerber is concerned, I am helpless."

His Excellency was firmly planted on the gubernatorial daïs once more. Mrs. Haxton evidently demanded plain speaking. Being a blunt man, he gave it to her. But she smiled again, quite pleasantly.

"That is what I may describe as the correct official attitude," she said. "If it were founded on fact, it would be unassailable. But Signor Alfieri can tell you that the Baron most certainly did not steal anything from him. If a culprit must be found, it was I, not Franz von Kerber, who should be charged with theft."

"Ah, *Dio mio*, you hear? She admits!"

Alfieri almost screeched the words. He was in a frenzy of passion. This woman had ever the power to drive him beyond bounds. He hated her now with an intensity born of derided love. The Governor would have stormed at him, but Mrs. Haxton accepted the challenge too promptly.

"I admit nothing," she cried with a sudden shrillness. "If admissions are necessary I shall wait until Abdullah confronts you. Then, when I have told my story, he shall tell his."

"Who cares for Abdullah!" came the retort. "Not I. It is well, indeed, to appeal to the testimony of an unknown Arab."

"You shall have the opportunity of refuting him," said Mrs. Haxton. "He is in Massowah. But that is a question for such tribunal as may exist in this lawless town. Your Excellency's decision is final?" she added, turning to the Governor.

"Absolutely irrevocable, signora. You see how it stands — my orders are explicit."

"Their explicitness is as nothing compared to the clearness of the next mandate you will receive from Rome," she blazed out. "Was it according to your orders that an English lady was carried off by brigands, simply to glut the vengeance of my discarded Beppo? You spoke of confederates, Signor Marchetti. What of the confederacy that permits this man to be your guest while your officers are making mock search for him in the bazaar? Your judges, even such as they are, will laugh him out of court when he tries to substantiate the charge he has brought against Baron von Kerber. Poor, love-sick fool! — to gratify his spite he attacks his rival with false evidence rather than let it be known that a woman twisted him round her little finger. Look at him now; he would strike me dead, if he dared; but he cannot answer me."

Alfieri leaped to his feet. His voice rose to a cracked falsetto.

"You hear, you hear!" was his cry. "She robbed me of the papyrus, yet boasts of it. She is a thief, self-confessed."

Mrs. Haxton also sprang up. Her physical dread of the man had yielded to the triumph of having cornered him.

"Truly I hope his Excellency hears," she said. "If I am to blame for the loss of your papers, why is Baron von Kerber in prison on your testimony?"

"You are both in league," he almost screamed. "I

was blind, infatuated, at Assouan. It was the Austrian who planned my undoing, and you, his paramour, who cajoled me out of my senses."

"I refuse to stay here and be insulted by such a coward," she said, gathering her skirts as though she intended to take her departure instantly. "But it will be a fine story that Signor Fenshawe cables from Aden when he tells how the Governor of Massowah aided and abetted this half-crazy poltroon in onslaughts on defenseless women. It was not enough that Italian law should be misused to further his ends, but the scum of the bazaar is enlisted under his banner, and he is supported by the authorities in an act that would be reprobated by any half-savage state in existence."

"I pray you calm yourself, signora," exclaimed Marchetti, now fully alive to the dangers confronting him. "You must see that I have only acted in an official capacity. I, at least, have no feeling in the matter. I received certain information —"

"Which was entirely misleading and one-sided," she broke in imperiously.

"Which certainly did not refer to you in any particular," was the sharp rejoinder, while he glanced at Alfieri. "If this gentleman is now prepared to say that he was mistaken —"

"Who dares to hint at any admission on my part?" shouted Alfieri.

The stout Governor did not like to be bawled at. He was sufficiently embarrassed already by the quagmire into which Alfieri had plunged him.

"You ought to be careful in your choice of words," he said pompously. "There is no question of 'dare' or 'dare not' where I am concerned. Signora, do me the favor of sitting here while I discuss matters briefly with Signor Alfieri. Signor, be good enough to precede me."

He pointed to the door. With a queer catching at her breath, Mrs. Haxton sank into a chair. Alfieri folded his arms and gazed at the Governor with eyes that blazed under his heavy brows.

"You are the representative of Italy," he said, making a great effort to speak quietly. "I call on you to lodge that woman in a cell so that she may be tried with her accomplice."

"If you do not go instantly, and in silence, into the corridor, I shall call on my guards to take you there by force," exclaimed Marchetti with a more successful assumption of ease.

Alfieri turned his lambent glance on Mrs. Haxton, but the Governor stopped the imminent outburst.

"I said 'in silence,'" he roared, stretching a hand to grasp a bell-rope. Alfieri, with a fierce gesture of disdain, went out. His Excellency bowed to the lady.

"Two minutes," he murmured. "The wine on the table is Capri. You will find it grateful after this somewhat heated interview."

But Mrs. Haxton drank no wine when the Governor followed Alfieri. She bit her lips and clenched her hands in an agony of restraint. This lull in the storm was more trying than the full fury of the blast.

The Governor's two minutes lengthened into ten. Then he hurried back, alone. He was manifestly ill at ease, though he spoke glibly enough.

"I am taking a grave step, signora," he said, "but I feel that the peculiar circumstances warrant it. I have released the Baron von Kerber. He is now awaiting you, and it will give me much pleasure to conduct you to your carriage. Yet I pray you give earnest heed to me. I have told him what I now tell you — this undertaking of yours must be abandoned. Not only is it my duty to prevent it at all costs, but an expedition starts for the Five Hills this very night. So, you see, you are sure to fail in any case. The exact locality is known, and Signor Alfieri has an armed escort. I repeat, you have failed. May I hope, without being rude, that your love affairs may be more prosperous. Charming woman that you are, I cannot compliment you on either of your present suitors. My advice is, go back to England, and help me to-morrow in persuading Signor Fenshawe to let matters rest where they are."

As one walking in a dream, Mrs. Haxton accompanied Marchetti to the courtyard. There she found von Kerber, who ran to meet her.

"So it is you," he cried in English. "I guessed it, though they would tell me nothing."

The Governor was most polite. He would not lecture them before natives.

"I have spoken as a friend to-night," he murmured. "To-morrow I shall be an official once more."

The alabeeyah rattled across the paved square towards the gateway. Alfieri, on whom an officer kept an eye, watched it with malevolence from an upper window.

"There go two people whom I hate," he said to his guardian. "They have escaped me this time. When I am rich, rich as any king in Europe, I shall have a king's power. Then I shall find them and crush them utterly."

The driver swung his horses towards the sea front.

"No, no," cried Mrs. Haxton. "Go through the bazaar. Drive slowly." And, in the next breath, she explained to von Kerber: "We must find Abdullah. He is somewhere in the main street. Above all things, we must find Abdullah. Alfieri leaves Massowah to-night, and he is making for the Five Hills. Our only hope lies with Abdullah."

CHAPTER XII

STUMP DEPENDS ON OBSERVATION

After eight hours of dreamless sleep, Irene awoke to a torpid but blissful conviction that bed is a most comfortable place when bones ache and the slightest movement is made irksome by patches of chafed skin. In fact, having buried her hands gingerly in the wealth of brown hair that streamed over the pillow, she lay and watched the white planks of the deck overhead, wondering idly what time it was. The effort to guess the hour brought her a stage nearer complete consciousness. Her first precise recollection was also pleasant. She thought of the way in which Royson had carried her in his arms not so many hours earlier, and the memory banished all others for many minutes.

If she smiled and blushed a little, it may be pleaded that she was twenty years of age, and had passed her girlhood amidst surroundings from which young men eligible to carry young ladies in their arms, or even hold them there, were rigorously excluded. Not that her grandfather was a misanthrope, but his interests were bound up so thoroughly in Egyptian research that his friends were, for the most part, elderly savants with kindred tastes. The wreck of the *Bokhara*, too,

with Irene's father and mother among its passengers, had helped to cut him off from the social world. When the grief of that tragedy had yielded to the passing years he hardly realized that the little child who had crept into his affections was growing up into a beautiful and light-hearted girl. Quite insensibly she assimilated herself to his hobbies and studies, became mistress of his London house and fine estate in Berkshire, and, by operation of forces more effective in their way than any Puritanical safeguards, lived apart from the gay throng in which she was eminently fitted to take a leading place.

Irene offered, then, a somewhat unusual type. While other girls might recount the number of male hearts they had subdued during the past season, Irene could state, with equal accuracy, the names of the gods of the Memphite order. Though her grandfather's wealth and the eagerness of a skilled maid compelled her to take a passing interest in fashions, she was far more devoted to variations in scarabs. Such attainments, if sedulously pursued during the succeeding decade, might have converted her into an alarmingly precise Bas Bleu! As it was, the Memphite gods smiled on her, and the scarabs might buzz off to their museums contentedly at any moment, for Irene was only waiting the advent of an undreamed-of influence into her life to develop into a tender, sympathetic, delightful womanhood.

Indeed, if Ka and Ra and beetle-headed Khepra were so important in the scheme of existence that this

dainty scientist cared naught for the moth-life of society, why, then, did she blush when she remembered how closely Dick Royson had clasped her to his breast over-night? Perhaps she might have asked herself that question, only to blush more deeply in trying to answer it, had not her thoughts been distracted by the extraordinary behavior of a silk underskirt hanging on a peg at the foot of the bed. It was swinging to and fro with the regularity of a pendulum, and that which is regular in a pendulum is fantastically irregular in an underskirt. She sat up quickly, and listened. There was a swish of water outside. Now and again she heard a slight movement of the rudder chains in their boxes. Then, all aglow with wonder and excitement, she jumped out of bed and drew the curtain of one of the two tiny portholes that gave light to her cabin.

Yes, another marvel had happened. The yacht was speeding along under canvas,— was already far out at sea. Where Massowah's yellow sandspit shone yesterday were now blue wavelets dancing in the sun, and Irene was sailor enough to know that the *Aphrodite* was bound south.

She rang an electric bell, and her maid came.

"Yes, miss," said the girl, "we've been going since midnight. As soon as Mrs. Haxton and Baron von Kerber came on board —"

"Baron von Kerber, did you say?" broke in Irene breathlessly.

"Yes, miss. He came with Mrs. Haxton. Mind

you, miss, I haven't seen him, but one of the stewards told me that the Baron went straight to Mr. Fenshawe's cabin, and the order was given to raise the anchor immediately. I'm sure they made plenty of noise. They woke me up, miss, and I'm a sound sleeper."

The maid was ready to say more, but Irene had learnt to discourage servants' gossip.

"I think the *Aphrodite* might have fired cannons last night without disturbing me," she declared lightly. "What time is it?"

"Nearly nine o'clock, miss. No one seemed to be stirring, so Mr. Gibson put off breakfast for half an hour. He said that everybody must be worn out after yesterday's worries."

Irene laughed. Gibson, the head steward, a fatherly sort of man, was a martinet in the matter of punctuality at meals. This adjourning of the breakfast hour was a great concession on his part. It showed how strenuous life had been at Massowah.

Despite her aches and pains, she dressed rapidly. She was all agog to learn how von Kerber had regained his liberty, and what new development was marked by the yacht's unexpected sailing. When she hurried to the bridge for news, the first person she met was Royson, and perhaps one of those old deities of Memphis would have smiled darkly were he privileged to see the tell-tale color that leaped to both faces.

Naturally, the girl was the speedier to find her tongue.

"Good gracious, Mr. Royson," she said, "what is the meaning of this?" and a generous hand-sweep included sea and sky and distant coastline in the eager question.

"I don't know," he said. "Captain Stump and Mr. Tagg entered into a conspiracy to keep me in bed. I have not been on deck five minutes."

"But didn't you ask? Aren't you consumed with curiosity? Who is in charge of the bridge?"

"Mr. Tagg. His stock of information is limited. 'Cleared the islands at four bells; course South-40-East' is practically all he has to say."

"It may be, then, that you are good at guessing? Have you not heard that the Baron is with us?"

"Yes, Miss Fenshawe, I knew that last night. Indeed, I heard his boat hail the watch. I was lying awake, and the Baron's voice is easily recognizable."

"Mrs. Haxton seems to have succeeded where all else failed. Did you see any of their companions? Was El Jaridiah with them?"

"No. I plead guilty to opening a port and looking out. The tide carried the boat close beneath me when she was cast loose from the gangway. El Jaridiah, or Abdullah, if that is his name, was not there."

"It is all very mysterious and puzzling," said Irene, gazing at the purple mountains which fringed the southwest horizon. "I am sorry we have not been able to reward the man, and I had set my heart on buying Moti. Don't you think it was rather wonderful

He did not dare meet the glance suddenly turned on him

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that such a weedy-looking animal should have carried us so safely?"

"It was all very wonderful," Dick replied, but he did not dare to meet the glance suddenly turned on him. For some reason, Miss Fenshawe decided to guide their talk into a less personal channel.

"If the breakfast gong does not ring immediately, I shall go and hammer on grandad's door," she vowed. "He hates being disturbed when he is dressing, but I am simply aching to find out what has happened and where we are going. And, talking of aches, Mr. Royson, look at my poor wrists."

She held out both her hands, close together, with the palms downwards. Royson noticed instantly she was wearing a beautiful marquise ring on the middle finger of her left hand. The rules which govern the use of these baubles were beyond his ken. A plain gold ring on a lady's so-called fourth finger is a marriage token known to all men, but he had not the ghost of an idea where an engagement ring should be carried, and he jumped to the conclusion that the girl was wearing one. Why had he never seen it before, he wondered? Was it a hint, a reminder of the conventions? It is probable that Irene herself would have been surprised if she were told that it was once the custom for engaged young ladies to reveal their happiness by displaying a ring on the middle finger, while those who were free but prepared to wed might coyly announce the fact by a ring on the index finger. Be that as it may, Royson was dumfounded by the sight of the glistening dia-

monds. They winked at him evilly, and his tongue tripped:

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am," he murmured thickly. Irene dropped her hands.

"Unless you are able to squint, you didn't look at my wrists at all," she exclaimed. A gong pealed loudly from the cabin, and she ran off. Dick made for the chart-room, in front of which Tagg was leaning on the rail and gazing ahead.

"You've bin quick," said the chief. "'Keep her steady as she goes, South-40-East, until the ole man comes on deck. If the wind drops, call 'im."

Then Dick remembered that Tagg had bidden him have his breakfast before he came on duty. Royson said nothing, but took his station on the bridge. Tagg, being lame, preferred to swing himself to the main deck, whence he hopped into the small cabin where the officers ate their meals. He came back instantly.

"Wot's the game?" he inquired sympathetically. "You've eaten nothin'. Feelin' bad?"

"No. Oh, no." Royson laughed and reddened.

"Then wot's wrong? Didn't you fancy the corfee an' bacon after the high livin' ashore?"

"The fact is, I met Miss Fenshawe, and she detained me a few minutes."

"Is that any reason why you shouldn't eat?"

"None whatever. I — er — really — forgot."

"Forgot your breakfast! Come orf of it."

Tagg climbed up, monkey-like.

"Take my tip," he said earnestly. "This is a bad

climate to go hungry in. You'd 'ave a touch of the sun in less'n no time. Just go below, an' force yerself to nibble a bit. It'll do you good, an' I don't mind keepin' watch another spell."

Royson obeyed in silence. His friend's kindliness supplied an unconscious but necessary tonic to his system. Obviously, the second mate of the *Aphrodite* had no business to trouble his head about the symbolism of rings worn by Miss Irene Fenshawe. Yet he wished he knew which was the engagement finger.

Shortly before noon Captain Stump came on deck to take the sun. This was a semi-religious rite with Stump. Though the contours of the coast drawn along two sides of the Admiralty chart rendered a solar observation quite needless within sight of land, he proceeded to ascertain the yacht's position according to the formula, or, at any rate, according to such portion of it as applied to his rule-of-thumb calculations. Having pricked the chart and written the log, Stump bit the end off a cigar. He was ready for a gossip with Royson.

"You won't find life quite so lively at Aden as at Massowah," he said.

"We are bound for Aden, then?"

"Where did you think we was headin' for? Melbourne?"

"Well, sir, if I gave any thought to it I inclined more to the belief that we were making for our original destination."

"An' where was that?"

"A bay somewhere south of us, not far from Perin."

"Have you heard anything fresh?" asked Stump quickly.

"Not a word. But, if we reach Aden, I suppose the expedition will be abandoned."

"They're chewin' about it now in the saloon," said the skipper, glancing over his shoulder to make sure there was no one within earshot. His sailor's eye swept the horizon at the same instant, and he saw a smoke-blur some miles astern. Breaking off the conversation abruptly, he went into the chart-house, and returned with a telescope, which he balanced against a stay.

"There's a steamer comin' after us in a desprit hurry," he announced, when a prolonged examination had enabled him to form an opinion.

"After us?" repeated Dick.

"That's the way I read it. She's from Massowah. The reg'lar channel is fifty miles east. Tell you wot, it's that I-talian gunboat the guv'nor spoke about."

"But she was not in port when we left."

"No. We passed her comin' in."

"Ah, she recognized us?"

"Not much. We were under sail, an' carried no masthead light. When I twigged hers I tied a couple of sou'westers over our side lights. It's a good thing at sea to mind your own business sometimes, an', more'n that, to take care that other people mind theirs when they want to be nasty."

"Shall we keep on under canvas, sir?"

"As long as the wind lasts," said Stump, closing the telescope and rolling off towards the saloon. Within a minute all hands were on deck. The corporate life of a small ship is closely knit. The word had gone round that a gunboat was in pursuit, and every one wanted to see her.

Mr. Fenshawe and Baron von Kerber stood apart. The older man was visibly annoyed by this new instance of Italian interference. Royson, pacing the tiny bridge, caught an occasional glimpse of the millionaire's emphatic gestures. The Austrian was more sallow than usual, but that might be the result of his unpleasant experiences on the previous day. Irene came to the bridge. Though she knew that none except the captain might converse with the officer on duty, she whispered timidly:

"They won't fire at us, Mr. Royson, will they?"

He smiled reassuringly. The tremor in her voice was delightful. It made him forget that wretched ring for a moment.

"No, that is not to be feared, Miss Fenshawe. My experience of the sea is no greater than your own, but you may be sure the Italians will follow the rules. If they really wish to overhaul us they will fly a signal soon."

The warship was traveling sixteen knots an hour, the *Aphrodite* seven, so the chase did not last long. About one o'clock the green, white, and red ensign of Italy fluttered to the end of the pursuing vessel's fore-

yard, where it could be seen most easily; under it were shown the red and white striped code signal, and the "J" flag, which latter, in the language of the sea, means, "Stop; I have something important to communicate."

The British ensign was run up, followed by the answering pennant, the mainsail was lowered, the foresail backed, and the yacht was brought to, while the Italian ship, which was made out to be the *Cigno*, came on rapidly.

Mrs. Haxton approached Stump and whispered in his ear.

"Quite right, m'am," he nodded. He walked forward and looked at the crew, mustered in full strength in the fore part.

"Every man, 'cept those on watch, go below," he growled, "an' mind you keep there, with all ports closed, until I ax you to show your ugly mugs on deck."

They obeyed in sulky silence, though they appreciated the reason of the order. Hence, when the *Cigno* stopped her panting engines abreast of the *Aphrodite*, there were many more pairs of eyes watching from the yacht than the Italian captain reckoned on.

The warship lowered a boat. Something went wrong with the gear, the after block jammed, the boat fell and dangled from her davits bows first, and an officer and half a dozen men were thrown into the sea. They were soon rescued, but the mishap did not tend to sweeten the temper of the *Cigno's* commander. A dry

officer and crew were requisitioned, and the boat was pulled alongside the yacht.

Stump, with a malicious grin on his face, leaned over the starboard rail.

"Wot is it?" he demanded. "Have you lost yer bearin's?"

The officer replied in Italian, greatly to Stump's disgust.

"I s'pose the chap they chucked overboard was the on'y Dago among 'em who could speak English," he grunted, but Mrs. Haxton explained that the officer was asking for the gangway to be lowered. Stump nodded to a couple of sailors, and the ladder dropped so smartly that the boat nearly came to grief a second time.

The officer bowed very politely when he reached the deck. Probably he was surprised to find himself in the presence of two such beautiful women. Though Irene spoke Italian, Mrs. Haxton took on herself the rôle of interpreter. The *Cigno* carried two letters from the Governor of Massowah, she said. One was addressed to Signor Fenshawe, the other to the signor captain of the British yacht *Aphrodite*. Would the two gentlemen kindly read and acknowledge receipt of the Governor's epistles?

Both were purely formal documents. They set forth the official demand that the *Aphrodite* should not attempt to land any of her occupants on Italian territory at other than a recognized port, and warned her owner and commander that the *Cigno* would enforce observance of the request.

At first, Mr. Fenshawe refused angrily to give a written reply, but von Kerber prevailed on him, and he wrote:

"Mr. Hiram Fenshawe begs to inform the Governor of Erythrea that his prohibition of the landing of a British scientific expedition in the colony he rules is arbitrary and unwarranted. Mr. Hiram Fenshawe is further of opinion that the said prohibition is part of the lawless treatment to which he and other members of the yacht's company were subjected during their visit to the 'recognized port' of Massowah. Finally, Mr. Hiram Fenshawe intends to lay the whole matter before the British Foreign Office."

This stiff-necked answer showed clearly that the writer was still on von Kerber's side, no matter what revelations were contained in the letter from London which Royson knew of. Irene copied the note for her grandfather. She made no comment. Perhaps her own island blood was a-boil at the cavalier tone of the Governor's threat.

Stump's letter was characteristic. It ran:

"S. Y. *Aphrodite*,
"Lat. 15° 10′ N., Long. 41° 15′ E.
"Sir — Yours at hand. Will act as think fit.
"Yours truly,
"John Stump, *Master*."

The disagreeable part of this business ended, the Italian officer conveyed the compliments of the *Cigno's* commander, and, on his behalf, invited Signor Fenshawe and the two ladies to luncheon. Mr. Fenshawe

stiffly declined, on the plea that he did not wish to interrupt the voyage, and the envoy went back to his ship.

The *Aphrodite* swung round into the wind, dipped her ensign, and was soon bowling along at her usual rate. The *Cigno* stood away for the coast, but, as the day wore, it was palpable that she did not mean to part company with the yacht until the Straits of Bab-el-mandeb were passed.

About four o'clock the wind dropped and the engines were called on. With the night the wind rose again but veered to the south. The *Cigno's* lights were clearly visible at about three miles' distance. Her white masthead light watched the *Aphrodite* without blinking, while her red and green eyes suggested to Irene's fancy some fabled monster of the deep waiting to pounce on the yacht if she deviated an inch from her seaward course.

The girl snatched a few minutes' talk with Royson. Von Kerber, it seemed, had persuaded her grandfather that Alfieri was the paid agent of rival archeologists who had got wind of the Sabæan hoard, and were able to secure the help of the Italian Government. She was convinced that the ill treatment meted out to them at Massowah had only confirmed the old gentleman's determination to best his opponents at all costs. The burking of his cablegrams, made known by the Baron, was the last straw in an aggravated load. The yacht was going to Aden to enable him to lodge a complaint with the proper authorities, but she would leave almost

at once for French Somaliland, where a *kafila* would be collected and a dash made across the Italian frontier. And Dick gathered that Irene herself was inclined to let affairs run their natural course. He agreed with her, which was to be expected, seeing that he was four-and twenty, and in love. He cudgeled his brains for some pretext to discuss rings and the manner of wearing them, but his wit failed him there. Irene on the deck of her grandfather's yacht differed in several important particulars from the tremulous girl who clung to him during that blissful journey of the previous night.

He tried to clear up this vital point with Tagg.

"Did you ever give a young lady an engagement ring?" he asked, after judiciously leading his chief to discourse on the frailties of the sex.

"Well," said Tagg reflectively, "it all depen's on the way you take it. I once gev' a girl a Mizpah ring, which she fancied when she saw'r it in a pawnshop window. Next time I met her she tole me she'd swopped it for a dress improver. The feller she was goin' to marry didn't like the motter as comin' from me, you see, but the funny thing was she never said a word about him when she saw'r me buyin' the ring. Since then, I've kep' me money in me pocket."

Royson took the morning watch, from 4 A.M. till 8. Stump joined him soon after dawn, and appeared to be anxious about the yacht's exact position. So far as Dick could judge from the chart, they were in safe waters; nevertheless, the stout skipper did not rest content until the tall peak of Jebel Aduali opened up

clear of Jebel Ash Ali, with Sanahbor Island bearing west.

A lighthouse on the mainland flashed a bright ray at them before the rising sun rendered its warning unnecessary. Still dogging them, the *Cigno* followed in their wake at half speed, but Stump gave no eye to the warship. He continued to scan the coast intently. A low, double-peaked hill intervened between the lofty Jebel Aduali and the ship. When its saddle cut the summit of the more distant mountain, Stump changed the course sharply.

To Royson's surprise, the yacht turned due west, and headed for the point whence the lighthouse had gleamed half an hour earlier.

And now, instead of looking ahead, Stump kept his telescope glued on the *Cigno*. A cloud of smoke from the gunboat's funnels showed that she had noted the *Aphrodite's* new direction, and meant to take a close interest in it. She had a few miles to make up, but that was a simple matter, and her nose swung to the southwest as she raced for the bay towards which the yacht was steaming.

Both vessels held on, following converging lines, for nearly an hour. By that time they were hardly a mile apart. Suddenly Stump sent the *Aphrodite* round until she lay on her previous course. In a word, after standing in for the land in the most decided manner, he was now making for the Straits again.

This behavior apparently puzzled the Italian vessel, as, indeed, it succeeded in puzzling Royson and the

man at the wheel, while the looks cast towards the bridge by the watch, who were mainly employed in swabbing the deck, told that the men were commenting on the yacht's erratic wanderings.

All at once the blare of a siren came faintly over the shimmering sea, and Stump chuckled triumphantly.

"He's found it," he roared, his voice almost rivaling the hoarseness of the far-off foghorn. "Sink me if that Dago wasn't so taken up with pipin' my antics that he's gone an' done it!"

"Done what, sir?" asked Dick, seeing that his respected skipper was in hilarious mood.

"Run his bloomin' *Cigno* onto the Scilla Shoal. Damme, I thought he'd do it. Listen to him," for another wail reached them from the disconsolate warship. "He's fixed there as though he was glued to it. He'll have to jettison all his bunker an' a gun or two afore he gets off. They tell me *Cigno* means 'swan.' I wonder wot's the I-talian for 'goose.' Go an' tell Tagg. Tell him to tumble up quick, if on'y for the sake of ole times."

Royson aroused the chief, and gave him the skipper's message. Tagg, rubbing his eyes, came on deck. He looked at the *Cigno*, heard her dismal trumpeting, and slowly took in the surroundings.

"Well, s'elp me!" he grinned. "Sorry to rake cold ashes, cap'n, but isn't that where you piled up the *Ocean Queen?*"

"Don't I know it!" growled Stump. "One solid month we stuck there, didn't we, Tagg? Threw over-

board two thousand tons o' best Cardiff, an' then had to be hauled off by another tramp. Well, good-by, Swan! I'll report you at Perim. An' mind you take care o' them letters. It 'ud be a pity if the Governor didn't 'ave 'em in time. By gad, I never thought I'd owe the *Ocean Queen* a good turn. She lost me my berth, an' nearly cost me my ticket, but she's made it up to-day. Come on, Tagg, we'll have a tot o' rum an' drink to the rotten ole hulk which gev' us best ag'in that swaggerin' I-talian. My godfather, won't Becky be pleased when she hears of it!"

And the two dived below to partake of the generous spirit which pays homage to the rising sun, while the *Cigno* bleated her distress to deaf ears.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SIGN IN THE SKY

"THERE is a spice of the nomad in all of us," said Irene, pulling up her hardy Somali pony and allowing him to graze on some prickly plant from which a grass-fed animal would have turned in hungry disgust. "Here am I, quite new to desert life, enjoying it to the full. Perhaps my remote ancestors were gipsies. Do I look like a gipsy, Mr. Royson?"

"My acquaintance with gipsies is limited," said Dick. "Once, being free from office troubles on Derby Day, I walked over Epsom Downs, and was beseeched many times to have my fortune told. Most of the prophetesses — they were all of your sex, Miss Fenshawe — were blessed with exceedingly fine complexions and beautiful eyes. If these are marked features of the gipsy tribe — "

"Don't you dare bring me out here in order to pay compliments."

"Indeed, I am but stating the bare truth to your face."

"If you persist, then, I shall be compelled to act the part of a gipsy and tell your fortune, and I warn you that it will not be very cheerful hearing."

Royson gazed beyond her towards a white mist which shrouded the eastern horizon. Overhead, the delicious blue of early morning was yielding to the noonday tint of molten copper.

"Even if we turn back to-day there are thirty marches between us and the sea," he said with seeming irrelevance.

But those two were beginning to understand one another, and the girl colored under the deep tan of sun and air.

"Whenever we are alone now you insist on talking nonsense," she said. "I really believe the desert has made you light-headed. Please be serious for a moment. I brought you here to —"

"I am glad you have corrected yourself. A moment ago you charged me with bringing *you* here."

"Well, then, we came here, if one must be so accurate, to be away from the others. At least, I mean — Well, that is a stupid way of putting it, but it will serve —"

"It has served most admirably," said Royson, glancing back at the long drawn-out caravan crossing the shallow valley they had just quitted.

"There you go again," she cried, with just a touch of petulance in her tone. "You know very well that I did not mean what I said."

"Not even when you promised to tell my fortune."

"I can explain myself that way if you like. Your fortune is singularly like my own at the present moment. You are accompanying a crowd of people who don't know where they are going, or what they mean

to do when they get there. I am quite sure the Baron is befogged, or, if that is not a happy expression in this wonderful atmosphere, shall I say lost? I don't speak Arabic, but I can read that man's face, and I watched him this morning when he was consulting our so-called guide. In plain English, Mr. Royson, we are drifting, in the vain hope that somewhere out there we shall find five hills in a clump. I don't object, in a sense. It is a very delightful picnic from one point of view. But I hate uncertainty, and I loathe deceit, and here we are at the mercy of both, while my grandfather is so taken up with the joy of arranging everything, which von Kerber very cleverly leaves to him, that he simply won't listen to me when I suggest the need of more definite information. And just think of it! Five Hills! With a rocky desert in front and five thousand hills to the left. What is to be the end of it all? Are we to go wandering on till we march into Suez, or Cairo?"

"Our sheikh is a marvel at finding oases," said Dick. "I wonder if there is a string of them all the way between here and —"

"Mr. Royson," broke in Irene, "you are the only person to whom I can confide my doubts and fears. They may be silly, but please don't adopt that tone. It — hurts."

Royson, who had dismounted, slipped his Arab's bridle under an arm and strode a pace nearer.

"Don't you see that we can do nothing at present?" he said earnestly. "I am alive to the difficulties which may beset us in the near future; but what would you

have me do, Miss Fenshawe? If your grandfather were not of the party, I know exactly what I would propose — at least, I think I know."

"And that is?"

"That Stump and some of our men should escort you and Mrs. Haxton back to Pajura, and let our Austrian friend ride his hobby to death. And believe me, I am not consulting my own wishes in saying that."

"Don't you wish to return?"

"No. I love this arid land. I never see the supercilious curl of a camel's lip or meet the bland contempt of his eye but I imagine him saying, 'Ah, Feringhi, were it not for your white skin I might whisper strange secrets into your ear, but you are an unbelieving dog, so perforce I remain dumb.' Hence, Miss Fenshawe, inclination pulls one way and common sense the other. As matters stand, I plead guilty to a profound gladness that common sense has not swayed us to-day, and may escape us to-morrow. Candidly, I am enjoying myself immensely."

"Then there is nothing more to be said," cried Irene, yielding somewhat to his buoyancy. "Shall we go on, or wait here for the *kafila* to overtake us."

"Unless I am greatly mistaken," said Dick, looking at his watch, "we shall find the usual oasis hidden in a depression about two miles ahead. Our excellent sheikh, Abdur Kad'r, times the morning march to end precisely at ten o'clock. It is now a quarter to nine. Our camels march two and a half miles per hour, and we are three quarters of a mile ahead. Therein, Miss

Fenshawe, you have a first-rate example of deductive reasoning, so I propose that we advance steadily, and look for a cluster of palms. If, happily, their shade is not taken up by other wanderers, you will be out of the sun long before the caravan arrives. What say you?"

"Some day I shall stamp my foot and say 'No'—shriek it at you, in fact. I hate any one who is always right, and you seem to be utterly different since we left the *Aphrodite*. I have never seen such a change in a man. One would think you were born in the desert. And you are learning Arabic ten times more quickly than I."

"I do not find favor in your eyes this morning, though it is good to know that I have reformed, since, by your own showing, I must have been always wrong aboard ship," said Dick, remounting.

"Oh, it is a perfect luxury to have some one to pitch into," cried the girl, stirring the Somali with her heel.

"But won't you tell me what I have done that vexes you, Miss Fenshawe?"

"You are absurd. You pretend that you see nothing, whereas I am sure you see more than I, but you refuse to speak."

Royson seemed to be singularly unaffected by this outburst. He caught the angry flush on the girl's forehead, and, as was his way when the stubborn fit seized him, threw his head back, with lips set. Irene stole a look at him, and laughed constrainedly.

"Very well. If you won't talk I must," she said,

with a great air of determination. "It is about Mrs. Haxton."

"A most interesting topic," said Royson.

"That is what my grandfather seems to think."

"He told me last night that he considers her a singularly well-informed woman."

"For well-informed read artful," exclaimed the girl bitterly. "Have you forgotten what I said to you in the canal? When we began our voyage Mrs. Haxton and the Baron were as good as engaged. Now they have reached some agreement which permits Mrs. Haxton to fly for higher matrimonial game than a penniless adventurer."

"Do you really think that?"

Royson had grown suddenly serious. He half turned in the saddle so as to seek the added inspiration of Irene's expression, but she kept her eyes studiously averted, and the broad-brimmed pith hat she wore helped to conceal her face. But she answered readily.

"I am quite certain of it. How else could I discuss it with you?"

"The view I take is that she merely wishes to give von Kerber every chance. So long as Mr. Fenshawe remains interested — beguiled, if you like — she switches his thoughts away from the object of our journey. Your grandfather is a masterful man, Miss Fenshawe. If he suspected that we were following a wild-goose chase he would turn south again this very hour."

"Yet I am sure of my ground," she persisted.

Royson's horse started and shied. A small brown snake, coiled up in the sunlight, and almost invisible amidst the stones, squirmed rapidly into a crevice beneath a rock. Such incidents in the desert were too frequent to demand comment. Dick patted the Arab's neck and soon soothed him.

"Failing our discovery of this fabled treasure, I can appreciate Mrs. Haxton's willingness to marry a millionaire," he went on. "Yet there are difficulties in the way. That viper reminds me of one. Would not von Kerber object?"

"No," said Irene.

They jogged along in silence for some distance. The girl added nothing to her emphatic monosyllable. Dick felt a tugging at his heart-strings which was becoming a dangerously frequent symptom.

"As you have favored me with your confidence thus far, won't you take the next step, and tell me why you credit Baron von Kerber with such complaisance?" he demanded.

"A woman should not always be asked for reasons, Mr. Royson," said she lightly.

"In the graver events of life one wishes for them, nevertheless."

"Perhaps we are deviating from the chief issue," she countered. "If only I could persuade grandad that he is being wilfully misled, things might go as I wish. Can't you help, Mr. Royson?"

Then she turned her face to his, and the temptation that had gripped him many a time of late came back

with an intensity that was almost unendurable. He did not flinch from her steadfast eyes. Though the path of honor was steep and straight he must tread it to the end.

"If I tell your grandfather what little I know of these people I break my word," he said harshly. "That is the only reply I can make, Miss Fenshawe. May I add the ignoble argument that any such breach of faith on my part would probably be useless? You ought to sympathize with me."

"Why?" she said coldly.

"Because it is not often that a man is tortured as I am by a conflict between duty and — and desire."

"There is our palm grove," she cried, pointing to a few stunted trees whose fronds showed above the rock-strewn bank of a small wady, or ravine, which cut through the center of the shelving plateau they were crossing. "The ground is fairly clear here. Shall we try a canter?"

Without waiting for a reply she pressed her pony into a steady gallop. Royson responded to her wayward mood, and followed her lead. Though the sun was so hot that their hands would have blistered if unprotected by gloves, the clean, dry air-current created by the rapid motion was exhilarating in the extreme. They were riding through a lost continent, yet its savage ruin was sublimely beautiful. The comparatively level spot that allowed the luxury of a gallop was made up of sand and stones, with here and there a black rock thrusting its bold contour above the

shingle. A curiously habitable aspect was given to the desert by numbers of irregular alluvial mounds which, on examination, were found to consist of caked soil held together by the roots of trees. So, at one time, this arid plain had borne a forest. To the mind's eye, here lay the dead earth's burial-place.

Ages ago a torrent had fertilized the surrounding tract, and its dried-up bed was marked by water-smoothed boulders. Here and there, small groups of dwarf bushes, covered with dagger-like thorns, drew sustenance from secret rills of moisture. The camel path they followed had the distinctness of daily use, though no recognized *kafila* had passed that way during the previous year, new trade routes to the interior having drawn the caravans in other directions. Soon it turned up the side of the ravine. The *sayall* bushes began to grow more densely, and the wady spread to a great width. Beyond a patch of pebbles lay a brown carpet of tough grass. In the center stood seven date-trees and a considerable number of stunted bushes, these latter differing from the *sayall* only in the size of their thorns, which were fully two inches long and seemingly untouchable. Yet, next to water, the thorn-crop constituted the chief wealth of the oasis, because camels would munch the tough spines with great relish.

The camping-place appeared to be untenanted. Royson found the footprints of gazelles wherever the sand had collected in a hollow, but the animals must have scampered away unseen towards the barren hills

near at hand. Through an occasional gap there were glimpses of the mighty ramparts of Abyssinia. It was hard to realize that the dainty gazelle could find food in this desolate land. Yet, with the inborn instinct of the hunter and scout, Royson unslung his carbine and held it across the saddle-bow as he urged his horse slightly in front of the short-striding Somali. When he drew rein he rose in the stirrups to peer through the barrier of thorns.

"First come, first served," he cried joyously. "We have the forage to ourselves, Miss Fenshawe. I shall be sorry for any others who come this way after our host has passed. Look at it now. It is an absolute army. We shall strip this poor little garden of the desert as locusts are said to eat up a cornfield."

Irene slipped from the saddle, loosened the girths, and then glanced at the distant caravan, which had just become visible again on the sky-line of the plateau. It was more than likely that no such mixed gathering of men and animals had taken that road since the destruction of forests converted the country into a wilderness. The party from the yacht numbered eighteen; there were fifty Bedawi Arabs in attendance on a hundred camels; eight horses, Arabs or Somali ponies, each required a syce, while the sheikh who had brought the caravan from Pajura was overlord of a score of hangers-on who figured in his list as servants.

A thin haze of dust rose as this regiment advanced. In that wonderful light its progress might be marked

twenty miles away by keen eyes. The girl watched it silently for a time, while Royson, knowing the manner in which the camp would be formed, picketed the two horses so as not to interfere with the general arrangements.

Then he lit a cigarette and rejoined Irene.

"How far distant is the head of the caravan now?" she asked.

"Nearly two miles. It looks more like two furlongs," said he, divining her thought, for it was easy to discern Mrs. Haxton, wrapped in a gray dust-cloak, on a splendid riding camel in advance of the main body; beside her, on Arab horses, were Mr. Fenshawe and von Kerber, the latter having just ridden up from the rear.

"Does one's sight become better, then, by residence in this strange land?" murmured the girl.

Royson deliberately ignored the less obvious significance of the words.

"I think so," he said. "When all is said and done, desert and sea are akin, and most certainly a sea voyage benefits the eyes. Yet, now that you mention it, the atmosphere is remarkably clear to-day."

"Are you weather-wise, Mr. Royson? Is not that a sign of storm?"

"I sought instruction from Sheikh Abdur Kad'r on that very point only this morning. He says that the Kamsin does not blow at this season, and there is every reason to believe that it has not rained in this locality during the past three hundred years."

"Dear me! Three — hun-dred — years!"

"Yes. Sorry, but I can't make it any less."

"Then you may give Sheikh Abdur Kad'r my compliments and tell him I predict either a thunderstorm or some unusual disturbance before night. Mrs. Haxton has a very effective smile, I admit, but it requires exceptional charm to make a smile distinctly visible at — how far did you say? — two miles?"

The lady in question was certainly bending towards Mr. Fenshawe, and the smile was a reasonable conjecture. But they had tacitly agreed to forget their earlier conversation. They chatted freely now with the friendly ease that was their wont ever since the exigencies of camp life had thrown them together far more than was possible on board ship. Five weeks ago the *Aphrodite* dropped anchor off Pajura after crossing from Aden, where Mr. Fenshawe had despatched his cablegrams and obtained a portion of the equipment needed for the desert tour. The arrival of such a large party occasioned no little excitement at the French port. That tiny station had not seen so many white faces at one time since its establishment, and, when its polite Commandant recovered from his voluble surprise, he warned Mr. Fenshawe that the interior was somewhat unsafe. But stories of Arab unrest were familiar to the veteran. He had heard them regularly during the preceding thirty years, and he was more than ever bent on outwitting the jealous rivals who had placed such obstacles in his path.

The French officers at Pajura thought he was rather

cracked to take ladies with him, yet they were obliged to admit that desert travel was healthy and enjoyable, provided supplies were ample, and, on this score, the skilled explorer of Soudan by-ways showed that he had lost none of his cunning. Before the caravan started news came from Aden that the *Cigno* had been dragged off her sandspit. This gave an added value to the land route, as the coast of Erythrea was assuredly closed to them; the French authorities, on the other hand, rendered every assistance in their power.

And now, after a month of steady marching, the caravan was well within Italian territory. The route lay parallel with the sea, but nearly a hundred miles distant from it. It traversed the interminable wadys and shelving table-lands leading down to the coast from the granite and pink Nubian stone foothills of the inner range of giants which guarded the fertile valleys of Abyssinia. Thus far, no unexpected difficulties had cropped up. The few nomads encountered were only too anxious to be friendly. The weather, scorching by day and intensely cold by night, was quite bearable. Indeed, to any one in good health, it supplied a marvelous tonic. Travelers less admirably equipped might have suffered annoyance from the snakes and scorpions which seem to thrive in the midst of sunburnt desolation, but these *voyageurs de luxe* slept in hammocks slung in roomy tents, and assiduous servants dislodged every stone before they spread the felt carpets on which the heaven-born deigned to sit at meals.

Yet — as Irene had guessed correctly — this magnificent progress through the desert contained a canker that threatened its destruction. Either von Kerber's calculations were at fault, or the papyrus was a madman's screed. The caravan was already two marches beyond the point agreed on by every authority consulted as that fixed by the Greek who survived the massacre of the Roman legion. The unhappy Austrian could no more identify the Five Hills mentioned in the papyrus as the essential clue to the whereabouts of the treasure than a man in an unknown forest can distinguish a special group of five trees. That is to say, he may blunder on them by chance, but he cannot find them by using his judgment. As Irene put it, here were not five, but five thousand hills. The mortal puzzle before von Kerber was to pick his five.

When the caravan arrived at the halting-place the tense solitude gave way to pandemonium. Camels grunted and squealed in eager plaint to be relieved of their loads, horses neighed and fought for the best tufts of grass, men raged at each other as though the work of preparing the camp were something new and wholly unexpected.

Through the turmoil strode Abdur Kad'r, a lean, saturnine Arab, who anathematized all his assistants indiscriminately, only varying his epithets according to the nationality of the man under the lash of his tongue at the moment.

"Bestir yourself, illegitimate one. Are we to await the setting sun ere the tents are fixed?" he shouted at

a negro who was bothered by a knotted rope. A crash behind him told that a too-zealous Arab had tumbled a box to the ground.

"Oh, you owl, what evil have you done?" roared the Sheikh, transfixing the culprit with a glittering eye.

"Lo, I loosened a strap, honored one, and the accursed thing fell," was the explanation.

"It fell, eh? So shall my whip fall, Sidi Hassan, if thou art not more painstaking." He rushed towards a group of Somali syces.

"Pigs, and children of pigs," he cried, "for what does the Effendi pay ye? Is there not occupation, ye black dogs? May your fathers' graves be defiled by curs!"

Stump, whose rubicund visage was burnt brick-red by the desert, took a keen interest in Abdur Kad'r's daily outpourings. He had no Arabic, but he appreicated the speaker's fluency.

"He'd make a bully good bo's'n," was his favorite comment, and he would add sorrowfully, "I wish I knew wot he was sayin'. It 'ud do me a treat."

In an astonishingly short space of time the camp would be in form, fires lit with parched shrubs gathered during the last stage of the journey, a meal cooked, and every one settled down to rest until sunset, when, if there was no evening march, the Arabs and negroes would sing, and perhaps indulge in amazingly realistic sword-play, while the dozen sailors brought from the yacht would watch the combatants or engage in a sing-song on their own account.

The present encampment offered no exception to the general rule. Abdur Kad'r, it is true, may have raged a little more extensively than usual when it was discovered that the well had caved in from sheer disuse, and several hours' labor would be necessary before some brackish water could be obtained. He did not trouble the Effendi with this detail, however. There was another more pressing matter to be dealt with, but, Allah be praised, that might wait till a less occupied hour, for the Frank was in no hurry, and he paid like a Kaliph.

About four o'clock Irene was sitting in her tent making some belated jottings in a diary. Being thirsty, she called a servant, and told him to bring a bottle of soda-water. A few minutes later she heard a stumble, a crash, and a loud exclamation in Arabic. The man had fallen over one of the heavy stones to which the guy-ropes were fastened.

She looked up smilingly, and wondered whether he would understand her if she said in French that she hoped he had not injured himself. The glass was broken, but the bottle was intact, for the native had caught it as he fell.

"Ça ne fait rien," she cried encouragingly. Then she found that the Somali had risen to his knees, and was gazing skyward with every token of abject terror. At the same instant a strange commotion broke out in the camp. Through the open side of the tent she saw Europeans and natives all looking in the one direction — northwards. The Britons and Arabs had an air of

profound astonishment. They pointed and gesticulated, but otherwise showed self-control. But the negroes were in a panic. For the most part they were kneeling. A few prostrated themselves at full length, and howled dolorously.

The girl was alone, and she naturally felt alarmed. Royson was not far away, and he, like the rest, was held spellbound by some spectacle the nature of which she could not guess. Perhaps his thoughts were not far removed from Irene, because he turned and looked at her.

"Come quickly, Miss Fenshawe," he shouted. "Here is the most wonderful mirage!"

Was that it — a mirage? Why, then, this hubbub? She had grown so accustomed to the grim humor of the desert in depicting clear streams of running water, smooth, tree-bordered lakes, and other delightful objects of which the arid land dreamed in its sleep of death, that the excitement caused in the camp was wholly inexplicable.

"What are you doing there?" she cried sharply to the frightened servant. "Go and get another glass, and take care you do not fall next time."

If he heard he paid no heed. He continued to stare at the sky with wide-open eyes.

Conscious of a fresh thrill of fear, she ran towards Royson.

"What in the world —"

Then she saw, and was stricken dumb with the sight, for she was looking at a spectacle which the desert

seldom provides even to those who pass their lives within its bounds. A thin haze had taken the place of the remarkable clearness of the morning hours. Away to the north it had deepened almost into a fog, a low-lying and luminous mist like the white pall which often shrouds the sea on a calm bright day in summer. The sky was losing its burnished copper hue and becoming blue again, and, on the false horizon supplied by the crest of the fog-bank, stood a brilliantly vivid panorama.

There were military tents, lines of picketed camels and horses, a great number of Arabs and blacks, and some fifty Italian soldiers, all magnified to gigantic proportions, but so clearly defined that the trappings of the animals, the military uniforms, and the gay-colored burnous of the Arabs were readily distinguishable.

It could be seen, too, that they were working. Mounds of rock and earth showed that considerable excavations had been made. While those gathered round the well were yet gazing at this bewildering and lifelike picture, the moving ghosts in the sky underwent a change which enhanced their realism. One squad of soldiers and natives marched off towards the tents while another took their places. Were it not for the grotesque size of men and animals and the eerie silence of their movements it was hard to believe that the eyes were not witnessing actualities. The thing was fantastic, awe-inspiring, stupendous in design, but faultlessly true in color and treatment. No artist could

ever hope for such a canvas. Its texture was vapor, its background the empyrean, and nature's own palette supplied the colors.

And this cloud scene was pitiless in its moral. Two of the onlookers, Mrs. Haxton and von Kerber, knew exactly what it meant, while others read its message correctly enough. The expedition was forestalled. The long voyage and longer march, the vast expenditure, the hardships inseparable from the journey through the desert, the hopes, the fears, all the planning and contriving, went for nothing, since Alfieri the dreamer, Alfieri the fool, had apparently succeeded in locating the treasure of Sheba.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEREIN A BISHARIN CAMEL BECOMES USEFUL

To the Arab every white man is a Frank. The European invader was given that name during the First Crusade, and the Paynim does not change appreciably with the centuries. But he has learnt to differentiate between certain varieties of Frank, and Abdur Kad'r murmured maledictions on the Italian species as he watched the mirage slowly fading into nothingness. Though no one had told him the ultimate objective of the caravan, he felt that the presence of Italian soldiers at the nearest stopping-place put a bar to further progress. The mere fact that the *kafila* came from French territory was unanswerable There were difficulties enough already, difficulties which must be discussed that evening, but this obstacle was wholly unforeseen.

Under his bent brows the gaunt sheikh had noted Mr. Fenshawe's manner when he turned excitedly to demand an explanation from von Kerber. The Effendi's change of tone told its own tale. Abdur Kad'r, true believer and desert-born, remarked to a brother Arab that Allah was Allah and Mahomet was undoubtedly the Prophet, but that of all the misbe-

gotten produce of swine now cumbering the earth the Italians ranked easily first — or words to that effect. Then he relieved his feelings by objurgating the panic-stricken Somalis, whose superstitious minds interpreted the appearance of the air-borne host as a sure indication of war. He was in the midst of an eloquent outburst when his employer summoned him.

"How far is it to the next oasis?" came the dreaded query.

Abdur Kad'r, shrewd judge of men, knew that he must be explicit.

"Sixty kilometers, honored one," he replied.

"What! Nearly forty English miles?"

"It may be so, Effendi. In our reckoning it is twenty kos, and one kos is three kilometers."

"But these Italians — in the mirage — they must be camped near water?"

"There is none nearer than the Well of Suleiman, Effendi."

"Is it possible that a mirage would reveal so clearly a scene taking place at such a distance?"

"Strange things happen in the desert, Effendi. I have seen a village in the sky which my camels were four hours in reaching, and I have been told of sights even more wonderful."

"You are sure about the sixty kilometers?"

"Quite sure, O worthy of honor."

Mr. Fenshawe was skeptical. Mirage-phenomena were familiar to him, but never had they dealt with natural objects beyond a range of a few miles. For

the most part, the mirage of the desert is a baseless illusion, depending on the bending of light-rays by air strata of differing densities. The rarer "looming," witnessed occasionally in more northerly latitudes, shows scenes actually in existence, and the best authenticated instance of a long-range view is that testified to by the inhabitants of Hastings, who during three hours on July 26, 1798, saw the whole coastline of France, from Calais to Dieppe, with a distinctness that was then regarded as miraculous.

But, whether Abdur Kad'r's figures were correct or not, there was no gainsaying the evidence of the mirage itself. The collapse of the undertaking was imminent, and the millionaire's tone was exceedingly curt when he called von Kerber to conference.

"There are certain matters which must be cleared up, now that nature has assumed the rôle of guide," he said dryly. "I have been well aware during the past few days that you were not able to fix on the exact place described in the papyrus. I could pardon that. We are in a country where landmarks are bewilderingly alike, and therefore apt to cause confusion. But how comes it that our rivals can go straight to the place we are in search of, while we wander blindly in the desert? You assured me that yours was the only copy of the papyrus extant with the sole exception of the photographic reproductions supplied to me. Is that true? And, if it is true, who gave these others the information that has brought about our failure?"

Mr. Fenshawe's pride was wounded. All the wrath

of the disappointed connoisseur welled forth in his contemptuous words. Their very calmness and precision showed the depth of his anger, and von Kerber, like Abdur Kad'r, felt that the time for specious pretext had gone. So he answered, with equal exactness of phrase:

"I gave you that assurance months ago in Scotland, and repeated it in London, but I have not said it since we met on board the yacht, for the very good reason that the papyrus was stolen from me at Marseilles."

"Stolen!"

"Yes, I was waylaid and robbed while driving from the station to the harbor."

"Purposely, do you mean? Was the papyrus the object of the attack?"

"Yes."

"Then this man, Alfieri, knew of it?"

"I have never concealed that from you."

"It is hard to say what you have or have not concealed, Baron von Kerber. My confidence in you is shaken. How am I to know that this latest version of Alfieri's amazing interference in your affairs is the true one?"

No man is so sensitive of his honor as he who is conscious of by-gone lapses. Von Kerber started as though the other had stabbed him.

"That is an unworthy imputation," he cried. "Mr. Royson can tell you that the papyrus was stolen. He rescued me from my assailants, yes? Mrs. Haxton is aware of it, and, unless I am mistaken, Miss Fenshawe

also is no stranger to the news, seeing that our second mate is so greatly in her confidence."

The older man, still watching the last wraiths of the mirage, seemed to be deaf to the Austrian's biting allusion to Irene.

"I did not look for such a web of deceit," he murmured. "The papyrus was genuine, and I sought no other proof of honesty. You say Mrs. Haxton and my granddaughter are in this pact of silence. Let us have their testimony."

Irene, as might be expected, indignantly disclaimed any sympathy with von Kerber's methods.

"I heard, by chance, of the part Mr. Royson took in the affair at Marseilles," she said. "My maid told me. It was the gossip of the ship. Yet, when I questioned Mr. Royson himself, he refused to discuss the matter, owing to some pledge of secrecy drawn from him by Baron von Kerber. You forget, grandad, how often you have told me that I did not understand this undertaking sufficiently to justify my hostility to it. I have never believed in it, not for one moment. If you wish to know what happened at Marseilles, why not ask Mr. Royson himself?"

"Yes," said Mr. Fenshawe quietly, "that will be well. Send for him, Irene."

It was noteworthy that he addressed no question to Mrs. Haxton. That lady, nervous and ill-at-ease, could not guess how far the rupture between von Kerber and his patron had gone. She felt intuitively that the Austrian was puzzled, perhaps alarmed, by the

presence of an official expedition in the very territory he had hoped to explore without hindrance — yet his manner hinted at something in reserve. Though he quivered under Irene's outspoken incredulity, his aspect was that of a man whose schemes have been foiled by sheer ill-luck. A rogue unmasked will grovel: von Kerber was defiant. For the moment, Mrs. Haxton was struck dumb with foreboding. Mr. Fenshawe's dejected air showed that a deadly blow had been dealt to the project to which she had devoted all her resources since the beginning of the march. She, too, had begun to doubt. Here, in the desert, the buried treasure was an intangible thing. In England, the promises of the Greek's dying message were satisfying by their very vagueness. In Africa, face to face with the tremendous solitude, they became unbelievable, a dim fable akin to the legends of vanished islands and those mysterious races to be found only in unknown lands, which have tickled the imaginations of mankind ever since the dawn of human intelligence. So, a live millionaire being a more definite asset than the hoard of a forgotten city, she had coolly informed von Kerber that if he wished to improve his fortunes, he would do well to pay attention to Miss Fenshawe, and leave her free to win a wealthy husband. It was a villainous pact, but it might have succeeded, at any rate in Mrs. Haxton's case, for no woman could be more gracious and deferentially flattering than she when she chose to exert herself. And now, reality seemed to yield to unreality. The substantial fabric

of close friendship between Fenshawe and herself had crumbled before the fiery breath of the wilderness. What a turn of fortune's wheel! Here were all her plans shattered in an instant, and the man on whom depended the future changed into a hostile judge.

Royson found a queer conclave awaiting him. Irene, distressed by the injustice of her grandfather's suspicion that she was sharing in a conspiracy of silence, had retired to a corner of the tent, and wore an air of indifference which she certainly did not feel. Mrs. Haxton, pallid, striving desperately to regain her self-possession, draped herself artistically in a comfortable camp chair. Von Kerber, scowling and depressed, stood near the entrance, and Mr. Fenshawe was seated in the center of the tent. The red light of the declining sun was full on his face, and Dick fancied that he had aged suddenly. Nor was this to be wondered at. No enthusiast, not even a wealthy one, likes to have his hopes of realizing a great achievement dashed to the ground, nor is it altogether gratifying that a woman who has won one's high esteem should be associated with a piece of contemptible trickery.

Mr. Fenshawe's first question told Dick that a serious dispute was toward.

"It has been stated," said Mr. Fenshawe, looking at him in a curiously critical way, "that a valuable document was stolen from Baron von Kerber at Marseilles — what do you know about it?"

Dick, hourly expecting a strenuous turn to the placid marching and camping of the past few weeks, was not taken unaware. He had mapped out a clear line, and meant to follow it.

"I regret to say that I cannot answer you, Mr. Fenshawe," said he, meeting the older man's searching glance unflinchingly.

"Why not?"

"Because I gave an undertaking to that effect to Baron von Kerber."

"But I am your employer, not he."

"No, sir. That is not my view of the contract I signed."

"Have you a copy of that contract?"

"Yes."

"Will you show it to me?"

"That is unnecessary," broke in von Kerber, with a savage impatience of the quasi-judicial inquiry which Mr. Fenshawe was evidently bent on conducting. "I give Mr. Royson full permission to answer any question you may put to him."

"You do, eh? You give permission? Do you pay his salary?" demanded the millionaire indignantly.

"Yes, on your behalf. Surely the arrangement between us cannot be disputed. I was to make all arrangements, yes?"

"As my paid agent, you should add."

Mrs. Haxton suddenly sat forward in her chair.

"We had a tacit agreement for an equal division of the spoil," she interposed, with an acidity that Mr.

Fenshawe probably found in marked contrast with her usual honeyed speech.

"That agreement would have been kept by me," said Fenshawe. "You may not be aware that Baron von Kerber pleaded poverty, and I promised to remunerate him for his services, whether we won or lost. I have no doubt he has my letter, duly stamped at Somerset House, carefully packed away with Mr. Royson's agreement."

The retort was in the nature of the tac-au-tac riposte beloved of the skilled swordsman. It was succeeded by a tense silence. Mrs. Haxton glared at the Baron. The ghost of a smile flickered on Irene's lips as she glanced at Dick. Von Kerber swished one of his boots viciously with a riding-whip. He found he must say something.

"Why are we creating difficulties where none exist?" he snarled. "If the agreement stands in the way, I absolve Mr. Royson from any promise he has made. I wanted to guard against treachery, not to tie him down to serve me exclusively."

"You asked for obedience and a still tongue, Baron. I have given you both," said Dick.

"There is your employer, and mine — speak."

Von Kerber could not be other than dramatic. He pointed to Mr. Fenshawe with a fine gesture.

"I have not much to say, unless in the form of opinions. You certainly were attacked at Marseilles, and you yourself charged one of your assailants with stealing the papyrus. Beyond that, I know little of

your business, though, from letters and cablegrams which reached me at various places, it seems to have been quite extensively known in London."

"Who was your informant?" asked Fenshawe.

"A solicitor, named Forbes. He is not personally acquainted with Baron von Kerber, but this man Alfieri, of whom we have heard so much, employed private detectives. They, in the course of events, discovered my identity, and met Mr. Forbes. It is only fair to Baron von Kerber to say that I have never heard his version of the charge brought against him by Alfieri."

"I have," said the millionaire, grimly.

There was no mistaking the inference to be drawn from his words. Von Kerber was wholly discredited. It was exceedingly probable that the first march of the return journey to Pajura would be ordered forthwith. Indeed, Fenshawe rose to his feet, meaning to bid Abdur Kad'r prepare to strike camp after the evening meal, when Mrs. Haxton, divining his intent, cried shrilly:

"May I ask what new circumstance has brought about this remarkable change in your plans, Mr. Fenshawe? It is true that we have been favored by an extraordinary vision of an Italian expedition at no great distance from our own, but what proof have we that it is successful, or even engaged on an errand similar to ours?"

"The mere fact that extensive research is being carried on is sufficiently convincing. Italian soldiers

and Arabs do not form huge earthworks in the desert for amusement," said Fenshawe.

"They may be trying a last desperate chance," she retorted.

"You forget that they have the same information as ourselves. There is no trouble in deciphering demotic Greek and the hieroglyph minerals are quite simple. Once the papyrus left Baron von Kerber's possession, our exclusive right to it vanished, and you can hardly expect me to engage in an armed attack on the military forces of a friendly nation."

"So far as the papyrus goes, it is utterly useless to any one," broke in von Kerber suddenly.

Mr. Fenshawe was stirred out of his studied calm by the seeming absurdity of the interruption.

"Useless!" he exclaimed, and his brow seamed with anger, "that is a strange word to apply to the only evidence of your story that you have ever produced."

"I always feared Alfieri," said the other, throwing his hands out as if he were pushing away a threatening phantom. "He was spiteful, and jealous, and he knew enough to drive him mad with desire. But I would allow no one to interfere with me, yes? When I was sure of my ground, when I had secured translations of each piece of the papyrus, I altered it."

"Altered it!"

Incredulity and hope were oddly mixed in the cry which came simultaneously from the lips of two of his hearers. Even Irene and Dick, less wrapped up in

the dream of finding the Sabæan hoard, awaited von Kerber's next utterance with bated breath. The man was too unnerved to feel any triumph at the sensation he had created.

"Yes," he said, sinking wearily into a chair, though his voice almost cracked with excitement. "I changed the distances in every instance permitted by the text. As it stands now, the papyrus is utterly worthless. I acted for the best, yes? A secret known to more than one ceases to be a secret. But I am tired of pretense, and you shall have the truth, though it carries with it a confession of ghastly failure. I do not know what good fortune Alfieri has blundered into at Suleiman's Well, and I admit that the place offered my own last chance. Yet, if he has found the treasure, it was not because of the papyrus, but despite it. Here are photographs of every section in their present form," and he produced some prints from a pocket-book.

"You were taught some Greek at school, Mr. Royson? Very well. Look at the passages which are faintly underlined, and you will see where I have altered whole phrases, converted tens of miles into hundreds, and hundreds of paces into thousands. And that is the document which Alfieri obtained at Marseilles. He would recognize it as the original, though it is now quite misleading. If he is digging at the right place by reason of the directions given there, it is something beyond belief, yes?"

"You speak of Alfieri recognizing the papyrus.

Evidently, then, he had seen it earlier. In what manner was he connected with its discovery?"

Mr. Fenshawe's coldly direct question came in sharp contrast with the Austrian's impassioned outburst. Von Kerber did not reply. With his elbows resting on his knees, and supporting his chin between clenched fists, he looked through the open door of the tent with eyes that stared into vacancy. The man was in a frenzy of despair. He saw the chance of his life slipping away from him, but he could urge no plea in his own behalf. It was Mrs. Haxton who answered, and her composure was oddly at variance with von Kerber's distress.

"Alfieri was assistant curator of a museum at Naples when the Italian occupation of Erythrea led to his appointment as government archeologist in this territory," she said. "My husband was in charge of the Red Sea cable at that time, and Signor Giuseppe Alfieri was a friend of ours. An Arab named Abdullah El Jaridiah, grubbing among old tombs for curios, came across a roll of papyri. He sold it to Alfieri for a few francs, and Alfieri gave it to my husband."

She paused; she was not a woman who said too much.

"I take it that Alfieri knew no Greek?" said Mr. Fenshawe, with a touch of irony that was not lost on the lady.

"He certainly failed to appreciate its importance," was the quiet response. "My husband deciphered most of the narrative, but he, in his turn, had no

knowledge of hieroglyphics, and, as you are aware, many of the words and figures are contained in ovals, or cartouches, and written in Egyptian characters. He would have learnt their meaning from some other source, but he — died — very suddenly. An accident caused Alfieri to suspect the value of the papyrus, and he asked me to return it. Unfortunately, I led him to believe that I would meet his wish, but Baron von Kerber, who, as you know, was medical officer to a German mission to King Menelek, came to my assistance at the time, and I told him of my husband's views with regard to the portion he had translated. Baron von Kerber read the hieroglyphics, though he had to wait nearly a year before he could obtain expert advice as to the accuracy of his rendering. Meanwhile, Signor Alfieri and I had quarreled. I may as well tell you that he was pestering me to marry him, and I grew to hate the man. Then I returned to England, and a friend suggested that I should endeavor to interest you. Now you have the whole story, so far as I am concerned in it."

"If that is so, it would have been better had you taken me into your confidence at the outset," said Fenshawe.

"Alfieri was using threats. I feared the loss of your co-operation if a melodramatic element were introduced."

"But are not you and Baron von Kerber, and, as it would seem, your Italian admirer also, attributing an absurdly fictitious value to the find? People do not

pay high prices for old coins merely because they are historic. I have always regarded this treasure-trove as purely antiquarian in its interest. It may contain some vessels or statuettes worth money; but to what extent? Certainly not such fabulous sums as you appear to imagine."

Mrs. Haxton smiled sourly.

"We are dealing in candor," she cried. "Pray complete your confession, Baron von Kerber."

The Austrian did not abandon his dejected pose, but he took up the parable readily.

"There is one slip of papyrus you have never seen, Mr. Fenshawe," he said. "Perhaps you have been surprised that such a careful scribe as Demetriades gave no details of the loot? I kept them back. There were fifty camel-loads of precious vessels and rare stuffs brought from the East. There were one hundred and twenty camel-loads of gold coins, and two camels carried leather wallets filled with pearls and rubies and diamonds."

Irene could not restrain a little gasp of wonderment at von Kerber's amazing catalogue. Her grandfather looked at her.

"You were wiser than I, little girl," he murmured. "You warned me that these people were deceiving me, yet I refused to listen."

"Oh, one has to follow the path that promises success," interrupted von Kerber savagely. "Had I told you these things you would have been the first to inform the Italian government. Why do you prate of

deceit? Had we found the treasure, you must have seen everything. I only meant to hold you to your bond and demand my third share. *Lieber Gott!* if you were not a stiff-necked Englishman you would now, even at the twelfth hour, force these Italian hirelings to disgorge."

"Meaning that you advise a surprise march on Suleiman's Well, and the massacre of every person who resists us?" inquired Mr. Fenshawe, acidly impatient.

"Better that than turn back at the very threshold."

"Excellent! The voyage of the *Aphrodite* would then achieve an international fame which would survive the ages."

The blank despair in von Kerber's face won Royson's pity. He could not help sympathizing with him. And there was something to be said for his point of view. If Mrs. Haxton had given the true version of the finding of the papyrus, the Austrian's methods were comprehensible. Seldom has poverty been tempted by a vision of such enormous wealth.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?" he asked, seeing that no one was willing to resume a somewhat acrid conversation.

"As to the form of attack?"

Mr. Fenshawe was still amused by the idea of treating the Italians to a *coup de main.*

"No. We have made a long journey, and it might at least be determined whether or not it was justified. Will you allow me and Abdur Kad'r, and, perhaps,

one other Arab less widely known than the sheikh, to try a small experiment. Let us endeavor to enter the Italian camp and find out what is going on? I can pass easily as a member of a shooting party who has lost his way. They will not slay me at sight on that account. At any rate, I am quite prepared to risk it."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Haxton, springing out of her chair. "Abdullah is there, and you know him. You must not appear. Let Abdur Kad'r send one of his men into the camp by night. He will bring Abdullah to you at a preconcerted rendezvous, and Abdullah will tell you what Alfieri is doing. Better still, let Abdullah come here. If he knows I sent you he will accompany you without a moment's delay."

"The proper person to go and summon Abdullah is Baron von Kerber," put in Irene tremulously.

"Before I sanction any proceeding of the sort, I wish to ask why Abdullah is apparently in league with your sworn enemy?" demanded Mr. Fenshawe.

"The Governor of Massowah told me he was despatching an expedition to the Five Hills," said Mrs. Haxton eagerly. "I was sure it would fail, for reasons which the Baron has explained, but I bade Abdullah join the *kafila*, seeing that we could not carry out our first plan of landing lower down the coast. Then, if the Italian party received news of our whereabouts, Abdullah would steal away and warn us. The mere fact that he is not here now shows that our presence in this locality is altogether unsuspected."

Fenshawe seemed to weigh his words before he answered.

"I prefer that Mr. Royson should go, and not Baron von Kerber," said he. "On the understanding that he interferes with our rivals in no way whatever, I shall be glad of his report. If we have failed, there is no harm in knowing the facts. May I ask, Baron, have you any other surprises to give us in the shape of history, ancient or modern?"

"I have nothing else to say," muttered the other.

"Then, as it is nearly dinner-time, I trust we may forget Saba and its legends until we learn what progress Signor Alfieri has made. You start to-night, Mr. Royson?"

"At the first possible moment, sir."

"No, no. Eat, rest, and travel under the stars. That is the golden rule of a forced march in the desert We will give you two nights and a day. Then, if you do not return, I shall send an open embassy to inquire for you."

Thus it came about that, soon after night fell, three sulky Bisharin camels were led away from their fellows and compelled to kneel unwillingly to receive their riders. The operation was attended with much squealing and groaning.

"They love not to leave their brethren," said Abdur Kad'r, pausing to take breath for a fresh torrent of abuse. The camels were forcibly persuaded, and Royson climbed into the high-peaked saddle. His last thought, as he quitted the red glare of the camp-

fires, was that Irene might have snatched a few minutes from her rest to bid him farewell. But she was nowhere to be seen, so after a final hand-shake with Stump, he rode away into the night.

CHAPTER XV

THE DESERT AWAKES

THE march Royson had undertaken was a trying one. The desert runs to extremes, and, at that season, the thermometer varied a hundred degrees between noon and midnight. When the sun dipped behind the hills a tense darkness fell on the land. This impenetrable pall is peculiar to Egypt; probably it suggested to Moses that ninth plague wherewith he afflicted the subjects of a stubborn Pharaoh. Though this "darkness that may be felt" yields, as a rule, to the brilliancy of the stars after half an hour's duration, while it lasts a lighted match cannot be seen beyond a distance of ten or twelve feet. It is due, in all likelihood, to the rapid radiation of surface heat. When the cold air has robbed sand and rock of the temperature acquired from the broiling sun, the atmosphere clears, and the desert reveals itself again in the gloomy monotone of night.

It may reasonably be supposed that the excess of humidity which caused the remarkable mirage of the afternoon helped to continue the "black hour," as the Arabs term it, far beyond its ordinary limits. Hence it was nearly ten o'clock when Royson quitted the camp

on his self-imposed task. To all outward semblance, he differed not a jot from the two Arabs who accompanied him. A burnous and hood covered his khaki riding costume. He bestrode a powerful camel nearly eight feet high. Like his companions, he carried a slung rifle; a haversack and water-bottle completed his equipment. His size alone distinguished him from Abdur Kad'r and Sheikh Hussain of Kenneh, the latter being a man whom Abdur Kad'r had selected as best fitted to win his way unquestioned into the Italian camp. Royson's Arab dress was intended to secure the party from espionage while they traveled towards Suleiman's Well. When they neared it he would throw aside the burnous. His pith helmet was on his saddle, but the Arab hood enabled him to dispense with it by night.

The older Arab led: behind him rode Royson; Hussain brought up the rear. In this fashion they climbed the slight rise of the wide valley which sheltered the expedition. They had gone some three hundred yards, and the leader was scanning the horizon for a gap through which the track passed, when they were all amazed to hear Miss Fenshawe's clear voice.

"I thought you were never coming, Mr. Royson," she said. "I was on the point of going back to my tent, but I caught the grumbling of your camels. Then I knew that you had really made a start."

After the first gasp of wonder and delight, Dick slipped to the ground. He narrowly avoided a spiteful bite from his unwilling conveyance, but he handed the

single rein to Abdur Kad'r, and hastened towards a rock in whose shadow stood Irene, garbed and cloaked so that she was scarcely discernible.

"I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you, Miss Fenshawe," he cried, "yet, in the same breath, I must protest against your wandering so far from the camp. Are you alone?"

"You may be sure of that. Otherwise I should not be here." She laughed cheerfully, for the escapade had in it a spice of adventure, and she wished to give it a lighter turn.

"Then you have news for me?"

"No. You heard all that passed to-day. Since then, my grandfather has refused to discuss the affair. As a result, Mrs. Haxton and the Baron were snappy during dinner. In fact, they were unendurable, and I was delighted when they left us."

"It is a hateful thing to have to lecture you," he said, coming nearer, and trying to peer into her face, "but you know you ought not to take this risk. It is too venturesome. I think that this section of the desert is fairly clear of any real danger, so far as prowling Bedouins are concerned, but there are other unpleasant neighbors — in the shape of snakes and scorpions —"

"I am wearing riding boots," she interrupted. "And I shall soon relieve your anxiety by returning to my hammock. Pray don't trouble about me, Mr. Royson. I have waylaid you with a purpose. It is too late now, I suppose, to dissuade you from carrying out a useless and absurd journey, but I do ask you not to commit

the further folly of sacrificing your own life, and, perhaps, the lives of others, in the mistaken belief that you are serving Mr. Fenshawe's interests."

Though she strove to speak in a tone of conventional friendliness, her voice shook a little. Dick was profoundly moved. It seemed to him suddenly that the burnous he wore exercised a stifling effect on him. He threw it off, and it fell unheeded to the loose stones at his feet. The girl laughed again, somewhat tremulously.

"What of those nasty creatures against which you warned me a moment ago?" she exclaimed. "Or is it that your disguise has become unbearable? You make an astonishingly tall Arab, Mr. Royson. I should have picked you out anywhere."

That wayward heart of Dick's drove a hot flood of color to his face, but he still held mastery over his tongue.

"Why do you think I am likely to run into danger?" he asked. For an instant his calmness misled her. She had grown accustomed to his habit of self-restraint, and looked for nothing else.

"Because you would dare anything rather than fail," she said. "You would ride alone into the midst of a thousand enemies if you thought that thereby you could attain your ends. And I want to assure you that I — that Mr. Fenshawe — would object most strenuously to your incurring any real peril for the sake of the worthless people who have brought us to Africa on a wild-goose chase. By all means secure

for us any possible information that can be obtained through the Arabs, but I came here because — because I shall feel happier if you promise me — that — you will avoid this man, Alfieri, and his friends. Did you see the look on Baron von Kerber's face to-day? I never before realized what the hunger for gold meant. He would kill any one who barred his path. I could read his very soul. And — and — it frightened me. So you must come back safely, Mr. Royson, for I have confidence in you and Captain Stump, but I am terrified of what may happen if von Kerber tells the others the story of the treasure, and promises them a large share in it, should it be found."

"I had not thought of that," said Dick simply. Indeed, his mind was not at all occupied just then with von Kerber's scheming.

"So I imagined. And that is why I stole out of my tent and waited here. I was sure you would agree with me that the really important thing is our speedy return to the yacht. It is the only possible course. My grandfather never intended to gain his ends by armed force, and von Kerber is assuredly dreaming of that at this moment."

"I begin to see your point of view," said he, forcing himself to answer her words, though his brain was weaving other phrases. "Even if I discover that Alfieri is digging up those precious camel-loads, it will be best for all parties that his success should be minimized."

"Yes, yes," she cried eagerly. "That is my mean-

ing. I do not care what happens so long as we all reach Pajura. Then let the Baron and Mrs. Haxton do as they choose. Even if they want to borrow our money and our goods and chattels for the purpose of a second expedition I shall be the first to support the idea."

"You are not longing, then, for a sight of the Sheban wealth?"

"No. I hate the very thought of it. It is — blood-stained. Oh, Mr. Royson, everything now depends on you. Please contrive matters so that we shall travel to the coast without delay. That is all. You understand me, I think. It only remains for me to wish you good-by and God-speed."

She moved a little apart, but Dick's left hand caught her by the shoulder.

"No, Irene, it is not all," he whispered. "I am going now, and I shall return to you, God willing, within thirty-six hours, and, before I go, I want to kiss you."

He could feel the quiver that shook her slender form at the unexpectedness of it. She uttered a startled cry, and wondered if she had heard aright, but she yielded to the clasp of an encircling arm. Perhaps she lifted her face in sheer amazement; be that as it may, Dick kissed her, not once, but many times.

"May Heaven guard and keep you, sweetheart," he said brokenly. "You know that I love you. You have known it many a day, but I forced myself to be silent because I was proud. Now my pride has given way to the joy of whispering that I love you. To-

morrow, that stubborn pride of mine may rebuke me, and say that I had no right to take you to my heart to-night, but to-night my love laughs at all that idle pretense of money erecting a barrier between you and me. You are dearer to me than life, and why should I not tell you so? I wanted to meet you to-night, Irene. I made plaint to the stars when I did not see you at parting. Now that you are here, I find myself at the gates of Paradise. Yet you must leave me now, dear one. Let me carry the fragrance of your kiss on my lips until the dawn. Then, in the chill of morning, when cold reason chides me, I shall refuse to listen to her, for I shall remember that Irene kissed me."

The girl clung to him during a blissful instant.

"Oh!" she sighed, and "Oh!" again, as though her heart was throbbing its life out. Then she murmured:

"You have not even asked me if I loved you, King Dick!"

With that she glanced up at him, and placed both hands on his shoulders.

"No," he said. "I only asked you to kiss me. I shall ask for your love when I may come without reproach and ask you to be my wife."

"Dick," she said, with adorable shyness, "it is not yet to-morrow."

He strained her to his breast. Their lips met again rapturously.

"Oh, my sweet," he said, "has ever man received more angelic answer to a question that filled his heart with longing throughout many days?"

"Go, Dick, but come back to me in safety" *Page* 269

"Yet you are leaving me, and of your own accord."

"Irene — you, too, are proud. Would you have me return now?"

"No. I know now that fate has chosen you to decide our fortunes. Go, Dick, but come back to me in safety, or my poor little heart will break."

Then, as though afraid of her own weakness, she drew herself from his arms and hurried away towards the camp. He stood motionless, listening to her footsteps, and his soul sang blithe canticles the while. At last, when assured that she was within her tent, he picked up the discarded burnous, strode to the waiting camels, and quickly the desert enfolded him and his dreams in its great silence.

And Dick thanked the desert for its kindliness, which had made possible that which was beyond credence. In London, how could a poverty-stricken outcast dare to raise his eyes to the patrician heiress? He remembered that first glance of hers, and the tactful way in which she had discriminated between the man who might be glad of a sovereign for the service he had rendered, and him who would value a woman's thanks far beyond gold. And then, with what quiet dignity she had ignored his fierce repudiation of von Kerber's offer of recompense. In that bitter hour how might he foresee the turn of fortune's wheel which in two short months would bring that dainty girl to his lover's embrace! How delightful it was to hear his nickname from her lips! King Dick! Well, such bold wooing ran in the blood, and it would go hard with

any man, whether Frank or Saracen, who barred the way between him and his chosen lady. What if her grandfather were fifty times a millionaire! What had millions to do with love? Precious little, quoth Richard, if all he had read of rich men's lives were even partly true. He had a twinge or two when he reflected that, at present, he occupied the position of second mate on Fenshawe's yacht. He pictured himself asking the old gentleman for Irene's hand in marriage, and being told that he was several sorts of a lunatic. But the memory of Irene's kisses rendered her grandfather's anticipated wrath quite bearable, and Dick laughed aloud at the joy and folly of it all, until Sheikh Abdur Kad'r was moved to say sharply:

"At night, in the desert, Effendi, the ears carry farther than the eyes, so it behooves us to make no more noise with our tongues than our camels make with their feet."

They journeyed slowly until a wondrous amber light first flooded the eastern horizon and then tinted the opposite hills with pink coral. Soon, rainbow shades of blue and green began to blend with the pink, and the undulating plateau they were traversing revealed with startling suddenness its scattered rocks and patches of loose stones. The camels were urged into a lurching trot, and thirty miles were covered in less time than it had taken to travel eight during the dark hours.

Beyond a few gazelles, a pair of marabout storks, and a troup of jackals, they saw no living creature. But they took every precaution against surprise. If

others were on the march they meant to discover the fact before they were themselves seen. So, when the ground was practicable, they crossed the sky-line at top speed, hastened through the intervening valley, and crept in Indian file to the next crest.

The Bisharin camels had long ceased to utter their unavailing growls. Such reasoning powers as they possessed told them that they must make the best of a bad business, as the lords of creation on their backs meant to reach the allotted destination without reference to the outraged feelings of three ill-used animals who had been deprived of a night's rest. Now, a camel has been taught, by long experience, that the legitimate end of a march is supplied only by something in the shape of an oasis, no matter how slight may be its store of prickly bushes and wiry grass. Therefore, these Bisharin brethren must have felt something akin to surprise when they were tethered and fed in a rock-strewn wady which offered neither food nor water. Animals and men had to depend on the supplies they had carried thither. Shelter, of course, there was none, and at nine o'clock the sun was already high in the heavens.

One unhappy beast made a tremendous row when Hussian mounted him again after a brief respite, and bade him be moving. Nevertheless, protest was useless, and only led to torture. Finally, squealing and weeping, the camel moved off, while his erstwhile sympathizers regarded him blandly and unmoved, seeing that they were not disturbed, but permitted to munch

in peace the remains of a meal. Hussain was soon out of sight. According to Abdur Kad'r's calculations, the Italian camp was in the center of the next important valley. At the utmost, it was three miles distant, and Hussain's presence early in the forenoon would be more readily accounted for if he put in an appearance on a camel that was obviously leg-weary.

Royson had given the man explicit instructions. If questioned, he was to state the actual facts — that an Englishman and himself, with one other Arab, had made a forced march from the nearest oasis, that his exhausted companions were resting at no great distance, and that he purposed returning to them with a replenished water-bag and some food for their camels. But, amid the bustle of a large encampment, it was more than likely that his arrival would pass unnoticed save by his brother Arabs. In that event, he could satisfy their curiosity without going into details, ascertain whether or not Abdullah the Spear-thrower was among them, and, by keeping his eyes and ears open, learn a good deal as to the progress effected by Alfieri in the work of exploration.

By hook or by crook, he must endeavor to return before sundown — if accompanied by Adbullah, so much the better. Then, having learnt his news, they could decide on the next step to be taken. Perhaps, if Abdullah came, they would be able to rejoin the expedition without further trouble.

After Hussain's departure, Royson and Abdur Kad'r disposed themselves to rest. Utilizing camel cloths

as *tentes d'abri*, they snatched a couple of hours of uneasy sleep; but the heat and insects drove even the seasoned sheikh to rebellion, and by midday both men preferred the hot air and sunshine to the sweltering shade of the stuffy cloths.

Irene was right when she said that Dick had made a great advance with his Arabic. He was master of many words of every-day use, and had also learnt a number of connected phrases. Abdur Kad'r knew some French. These joint attainments enabled them to carry on a conversation.

The Arab, with the curiosity of all men who do not read books, sought information as to life in big cities, and Royson amused himself by depicting the marvels of London. A limited vocabulary, no less than the dense ignorance of his guide on such topics as railways, electricity, paved streets, cabs, and other elements of existence in towns, rendered the descriptions vague. Suddenly, the sheikh broke in on Dick's labored recital with a query that gave the conversation an extraordinary turn.

"If you have so many remarkable things in your own land, Effendi, what do you seek here?" he asked, waving a lean hand in comprehensive sweep. "This is no place for town-bred men like the Hakim Effendi, nor for two such women as those who travel with us. You have ridden three hundred kilometers across the desert, and for what? To find five hills, says the Hakim. May Allah be praised that rich men should wish to spend so much money for so foolish a reason!"

"But the Hakim Effendi believes that there is an oasis marked by five hills somewhere in this district, and, were he to find it, we would dig, and perhaps discover some ancient articles buried there, articles of small value to the world generally, but highly prized by those who understand their history."

"I know this desert as you know those streets you have keen telling me of," said Abdur Kad'r, "and there is no oasis marked by five hills. You have seen every camping-ground between here and Pajura. There is but one other track, an old caravan road from the sea, which crosses our present line a few kilometers to the south. We passed it last night in the dark. It has only four wells. The nearest one is called the Well of Moses, the next, the Well of the Elephant —"

"Why should you Arabs have a well of Moses?" asked Dick, smiling. "It is not thought that Moses ever wandered in this locality, is it?"

"We respect Moses and all the prophets," said Abdur Kad'r seriously. He smoked in silence for a minute, seemingly searching his memory for something that had escaped it.

"Is it true," he demanded doubtingly, "that once upon a time many of the hills gave forth fire and smoke as from a furnace?"

"Quite true. Volcanoes we call them. All these mountains are volcanic in their origin."

"Then a moulvie whom I met once did not lie to me. He said that seven little mounds which stand near that well had been known to vomit ashes and

flame: thus, they came to be called the Seven-branched Candlestick of Moses. I suppose the well took the prophet's name in that way. Who knows?"

Royson had learnt of late how to school his face. Long practise under the witchery of Irene's eyes and Mrs. Haxton's ceaseless scrutiny enabled him now to conceal the lightning flash of inspiration that fired his intelligence. An old caravan road from the sea, a road that led to the Nile, with its fourth stopping-place made notable by seven tiny cones of an extinct volcano — surely that had the ring of actuality about it! Von Kerber had confessed to altering figures and distances in the papyrus — was this an instance? — were the "hills" they sought not five but seven in number? What an amazing thing it would be if this gaunt old sheikh held the clue to the burial-place of the treasure! It must have been on the tip of his tongue ever since they met him, yet the knowledge was withheld, solely on account of von Kerber's secretive methods. Had he told Abdur Kad'r that he was searching for an oasis sheltered by seven hills it was almost quite certain that the Well of Moses would at least have been mentioned as the only locality offering a remote resemblance to that which he sought. Somehow, Dick felt that he had stumbled on to the truth. Though tingling with excitement, he managed to control his voice.

"You say it is four marches from here to the sea?" he asked.

"Five, Effendi. There are four wells, but each is

thirty or thirty-five kilometers from the other. At one time, I have been told, many *kafilas* came that way, but the trade was killed by goods being carried in ships to other points, while it is recorded among my people that the curse of Allah fell on the land, and blighted it, and the trees died, and the streams dried up, until it became as you now see it."

Dick lit a fresh cigarette, and blew a great cloud of smoke before his eyes, lest the observant Arab should read the thoughts that made them glisten.

"Let us suppose," he said slowly, "that Fenshawe Effendi decided to make for the sea by that shorter road, there would be no difficulty in doing it?"

"Difficulty!" re-echoed the sheikh, "it might cost us many lives. A few men, leading spare camels with water-bags, might get through in safety, but it would be madness to attempt it with a big caravan. By the Prophet's beard, I did not like the prospect of this present march, though I knew there was water and food in plenty at Suleiman's Well. What, then, would happen if we found every well on the eastern road dry as a lime-kiln?"

"Yet you have been that way, you say?"

"Once, when I was young. But we were only a few Arabs, with a long string of camels."

"Did you find water?"

"*Malish* — I have forgotten. It is so long ago."

Royson rose to his feet and stretched himself. He wondered what Alfieri was disinterring at Suleiman's Well if the legion of Ælius Gallus had followed the

old-world route described by the Arab. Perhaps it was all a mad dream, and this latest development but an added trick of fantasy. Abdur Kad'r, looking up at him, chuckled softly.

"Effendi," he cried, "if you are as strong as you look, you must be of the breed of that Frankish king whom our great Soldan, Yussuf Ibn Ayub, fought in Syria eight hundred years ago. *Bismillah!* I have seen many a proper man, but none with height and bone like you."

Now, Dick knew that Abdur Kad'r was speaking of Richard the First and Saladin, and it did seem a strange thing that the founder of his race should be named at that moment. He laughed constrainedly.

"You have guessed truly, my friend," he said. "I am indeed a descendant of that famous fighter. Alas, the days have long passed since men met in fair contest with lance and sword. If I were fool enough to seek distinction to-day in the battle-field I might be slain by any monkey of a man who could aim a rifle."

"We die as God wills," was the Arab's pious rejoinder, "yet I have been in more than one fight in which a Frank of your size could have won a name for himself. But I am growing old. My hot days are ended, and you giaours are erecting boundary pillars on the desert. The free people are dying. We are scattered and divided. Soon there will not be a genuine Arab left. May the wrath of Allah fall on all unbelievers!"

Then did Royson laugh again, with a heartiness that

drove that passion of retrospect from Abdur Kad'r's dark features.

"Whatever happens, let not you and me quarrel," he cried. "We have enough on hand that we should keep our heads cool. And who can tell what this very day may bring forth? Things may happen ere we rejoin our caravan, Abdur Kad'r."

The sheikh bowed his head in confusion. It must have been the heat, he muttered, that caused his tongue to utter such folly. And, indeed, the excuse might serve, for the hot hours dragged most wearily, and the sun circled ever towards the hills, yet there came no sign of Hussain.

Royson was divided between his promise to Irene not to incur any avoidable risk and his natural wish to obtain the information so eagerly awaited in the camp. Though he meant to begin the return journey at sunset, here was five o'clock, and he no wiser than yesterday at the same hour. At last, inaction grew irksome. He helped Abdur Kad'r to saddle the camels, and they mounted, with intent to climb the northerly ridge, and thus survey the road which Hussain must pursue if he managed to get away from Italian surveillance before nightfall.

They proceeded warily. On gaining the opposing height they found that a broad plateau, flanked by a steep hill on the seaward side, barred any distant view, but Abdur Kad'r felt assured that the crest of this next hill would give them command of the whole range of broken country for many miles ahead. With this objective,

they urged the camels into a trot. When the shoulder of the rising ground became almost impassable for four-footed animals, and awkward beasts at that, they dismounted, tied the camels to heavy stones, and climbed the remainder of the way on foot.

They looked across a narrow valley into a wide and shallow depression, where a clump of palm trees and dense patches of *sayall* bushes instantly revealed the whereabouts of the oasis. It was easy to see the regular lines of newly-turned rubble and sand where trenches had been cut by the explorers. But the place was deserted. Not a man or horse, camel or tent, stood on the spot where the mirage had revealed a multitude some twenty-six hours earlier.

Roysen was so perplexed by the discovery that his gaze did not wander from the abandoned camp. Abdur Kad'r, quicker than he to read the tokens of the desert, pointed to a haze of dust that hung in the still air far to the north.

"The Italians have gone, Effendi," he said. "Perhaps they, too, were looking for an oasis with five hills. Behold, they have found one by a fool's counting, for this is the fifth hill within two kilometers of Suleiman's Well. The ways of Allah are wonderful. Can it be that they have discovered that which you seek?"

A sharp pang of disappointment shot through Royson's breast. He was about to tell Abdur Kad'r that they must now regain their camels and hasten to the oasis while there was sufficient light to examine the excavations, when the sheikh suddenly pulled him

down, for Dick had stood upright on a boulder to obtain an uninterrupted field of vision.

"Look!" he growled. "Four of them! And, by the Holy Kaaba, they mean mischief!"

Royson's eyes were good, clearer, in all probability, than the Arab's, but they were not trained to detect moving objects with such minute precision. Nevertheless, in a few seconds he made out the hoods of four men who were peering over the crest which separated the small valley from the larger one. They disappeared, and, while Royson and Abdur Kad'r were speculating on the motive that inspired this espionage, the hoods came in sight again, but this time they had the regular swing that betokened camel-riders. The four halted on the sky-line, and seemingly exchanged signals with others in the rear. Then they resumed their advance. They were fully armed; they carried their guns across the saddle-bow, and Dick saw that their cloaks were rather differently fashioned to those which he had taken note of hitherto.

"Hadendowas!" murmured Abdur Kad'r. "They are good fighters, Effendi, but born thieves. And how many ride behind? Not for twenty years have I met Hadendowas on this track."

The Arab's keen eyes did not cease to glare fixedly beyond the ridge. Soon he whispered again:

"They may not have seen us, Effendi, but we must be ready for them. Go you, and lead our camels into the hollow there," and he thrust his chin towards the seaward base of the hill. "I shall soon know if they

are playing fox with us. Our camels are of the Bisharin breed, while theirs are Persian, so we can always outstrip them if it comes to a race. You understand, Effendi; they come from Suleiman's Well. Perchance evil hath befallen Hussain."

Abhur Kad'r's advice was so obviously reasonable that Dick obeyed it, though unwillingly. He took the camels to the place indicated by his companion, and had no difficulty in finding a cleft in which they were quite hidden from the ken of any who followed the main track.

Soon he heard the sheikh hurrying after him.

"Had we awaited Hussain another half hour we should have been dead or captured by this time, Effendi," was his bewildering news. "A white man and nearly seventy Hadendowas, all armed, and leading pack camels, follow close behind the scouts. With them are Hussain and another, but their arms are bound, and they are roped to their beasts. The Giaour — may he be withered — rides my Bisharin camel."

Then Royson knew by intuition what had happened. Alfieri had failed in his quest. The Italian commander of the troops, refusing to sanction useless labor any longer, had marched north with his men. Alfieri, still clinging desperately to a chimera, had decided to remain and scour the desert until his stores gave out. And, at this crucial moment in his enterprise, came Hussain, the unconscious emissary of his rivals. The fact that the Arab was a prisoner spoke volumes. He had tried to communicate with Abdullah, and the watchful

Italian had guessed his true mission. The man might have been tortured until he confessed the whereabouts not only of Royson himself and Abdur Kad'r but of the whole expedition. There was but one thing to do, and that speedily.

"Up!" he shouted, dragging the camels forth to an open space. "You ride in front and set the pace."

"What would you do, Effendi?" cried the sheikh in alarm. "They will see us ere we have gone five hundred meters. Let us wait for the night."

"Up, I tell you," roared Royson, catching the Arab's shoulder in a steel grip. "In another ten minutes they will know we have fled, and they will hurry south at top speed. What chance have we of passing them in this country at night? Our sole hope is to head them. No more words, but ride. Believe me, Abdur Kad'r, it is life or death for you, and it matters little to me whether you die here, or in the next valley, or not at all."

Then the Arab knew that he had met his master. He climbed to the saddle, said words not in the Koran, and urged his camel into a frenzied run. Royson, who could never have persuaded his own long-legged steed to adopt such a pace, found it easy enough to induce the beast to follow his brother.

In this fashion, riding like madmen, they traversed the plateau and had almost begun the descent into the wady where they had spent the day, when a distant yell reached them. There was no need to look back, even if such a hazardous proceeding were warranted

by their break-neck gait. They were discovered, but they were in front, and that counts for a good deal in a race. They tore down the hill, lumbered across the dried-up bed of a long-vanished torrent, and pressed up the further side. As they neared the ridge, four rifle shots rang out, and Dick saw three little spurts of dust and stones kick up in front on the right, while a white spatter suddenly shone on a dark rock to the left.

"Faster!" he roared to Abdur Kad'r. "They cannot both ride and fire. In the next wady we shall be safe. Bend to it, my friend. Your reward will be great, and measured only by your haste in bringing me back to our camp."

CHAPTER XVI

A FLIGHT — AND A FIGHT

Mrs. Haxton was no laggard in her hammock on the day after Royson's departure from the camp, but, early riser though she was, Irene was up and dressed when the older woman came to her tent and asked if she might have a word with her. In fact, Irene had not undressed at all the previous night. When she tore herself from Dick's arms, she hurried back to the oasis, it is true, but only to draw a chair out into the open, and sit there under the stars, dreaming the dreams of a girl to whom the heaven of love has just thrown wide its portals.

Even the midnight chill did not drive her to bed. She closed the flap of her tent, lit a lamp, and tried to read, but the letters danced before her eyes. Instead of the scenes portrayed by the book, she saw three ghostly camels shuffling through stones and sand in the darkness, and, on one of them, the tall figure of the man whose parting words had filled her soul with honey sweetness. At last, weary with anxiety on his behalf, she threw herself, fully dressed, on her low-hung hammock, this being Mr. Fenshawe's clever device to protect European skins from the attacks of the insects

that swarm in the desert wherever there is any sign of dampness. She slept a few fitful hours, and her first waking thought was a prayer for Dick's well-being.

Then came Mrs. Haxton, and the girl received her with unaffected friendliness, being in the mood that demanded the sympathy she was prepared to offer to all who suffered. Her visitor was observant. Her woman's eyes noted that Irene was still attired in a muslin dinner dress, whereas she invariably wore a riding costume of brown holland or Assam silk in the morning.

"My dear Irene," she said, "I hope you will not allow that stupid dispute of yesterday to worry you into sleepless nights."

"But I have slept — quite a long time," was the girl's smiling disclaimer.

"Well, now — let us consider. Mr. Royson left the camp about ten o'clock. A young lady who shall be nameless said good-by to him half an hour later —"

"You saw me?" Irene flushed scarlet.

"No, indeed. I was too busy with my own sad affairs to act the part of a female Paul Pry, even involuntarily. But I did see you go to your tent, and I caught a glimpse of you at midnight when you were lighting your lamp. It is not yet six, so I am guessing things."

"If I were to return the compliment —"

"You would say that I, too, was not a heavy sleeper. Well, I make no secret of a perturbed night. That is why I am here now. I want your help, Irene. Strange

as it may seem, I appeal to you because I know you have always been opposed to my aims. Perhaps I am to blame for that. Had I forced Baron von Kerber to take you and Mr. Fenshawe fully into his confidence, events might have shaped themselves quite differently. But it is too late to talk of what might have been. You are more concerned with the future than with the past. Last night, while you were looking into the wonderland of the years to come, I was reviewing lost opportunities. Therefore, I come to you this morning somewhat chastened in spirit. May I talk without reserve?"

"Please, do," cried Irene, drawing her chair closer. In the sharp clarity of sunrise she saw that Mrs. Haxton's beautiful face was drawn and haggard. She was beginning to probe unsuspected depths in this woman's temperament. She understood something of the intense disappointment which the failure of the expedition must evoke in one to whom wealth and all that it yields constituted the breath of life. And then, she was in love, which predisposes its votaries towards charity.

Mrs. Haxton sighed. A consummate actress, for once her art was supplemented by real feeling.

"Ah," she murmured, her eyes filling with tears, "I find your pity hard to bear."

"Surely you are not going to cry just because I am sorry for you," cried the girl. "There now. Don't give way. Let me call one of the men. He will bring us some tea, and we can have a nice long chat before breakfast."

"Yes, do that. We both need it. My grief is rather selfish, Irene. I know your secret, dear girl, and I wish you every happiness, though the phrase carries with it the bitter self-communion that, for my own part, I have forfeited most things that make life happy. Well, that is not what I want to say. The storm has passed. Summon your slave, and bid the kettle boil."

Surprised and touched by the emotion displayed by her companion, Irene hastened to procure the beverage which Providence evidently intended for the consolation of afflicted womankind. The camp was already astir, and the crew of the *Aphrodite* were preparing their morning meal, so two cups of hot tea were quickly available.

When Mrs. Haxton spoke again, the tears had gone, and her voice resumed its pleasantly modulated tone.

"May I begin by assuming that you intend to marry Mr. Royson?" she asked.

Irene laughed softly, and her glance wandered beyond the busy camp to the distant hills.

"I have known more unlikely events to happen," she said.

"I thought so. I recognized the symptoms. Well, I want to make a sort of bargain with you. If you help me, I can help you, and, to show that I can give effect to my words, I shall tell you exactly what form my help will take before I state the nature of the assistance I ask from you, so that you may be at perfect liberty to give or withhold it as you choose."

"This is a rather one-sided contract, is it not?"

"No. I fancy it will be equitable. I have not lived in close intimacy with you during so many weeks without arriving at a fair estimate of your character. You are one of the fortunate people, Irene, who find it more blessed to give than to receive. At any rate I am satisfied to settle matters that way. And to come to the point, while you may experience grave difficulty in obtaining your grandfather's consent to your marriage with a penniless young gentleman of striking physique but no profession — Mr. Royson being even a second mate on sufferance, so to speak — the aspect of your affairs changes materially when your suitor becomes Sir Richard Royson, Baronet, with a fine estate and a rent-roll of five thousand pounds a year."

"How can you possibly know that?" gasped Irene, spilling half her tea in sheer excitement.

"It is more than possible — it is true. I happen to be aware of the facts. That thrice fortunate young man came into our lives at a moment when, by the merest chance, I was able to acquire some knowledge of his family history. His uncle, the twenty-sixth baronet, I believe, sustained an accident in childhood which unhappily made him a cripple and a hunchback. He grew up a misanthrope. He hated his only brother because he was tall and strong as befitted one of the race, and his hatred became a mania when Captain Henry Royson married a young lady on whom the dwarf baronet had set his mind. There never was the least reason to believe that she would have wed Sir Richard, but that did not prevent him from pursuing

her with a spite and vindictiveness that earned him very bad repute in Westmoreland. His brother and nephew were, however, his heirs, though the estate was a poor one, but, when minerals were discovered on the property, he persuaded Captain Royson to agree that the entail should be broken, as certain business developments could then be carried out more effectively. This was a reasonable thing in itself, but, unhappily, the younger brother was killed in the hunting-field, and some legal kink in the affair enabled the baronet to reduce the widow and her son to actual poverty. Young Royson made a gallant attempt to support his mother, but she died nearly five years ago. Naturally, there was a mortal feud between him and his uncle. Sir Richard's constant aim has been to crush his nephew. He arranged matters so that the bare title alone would pass to the heir at his death. Yet, on the very day that young Royson stopped your frightened horses in Buckingham Palace Road, the baronet slipped on the oak floor of the picture gallery in Orme Castle — that is the name of their place in the North — and injured his spine. The nearness of death seems to have frightened him into an act of retribution. He made a new will, constituting your Richard his heir, and he died the day before our caravan left Pajura."

A certain cold disdain had crept into Irene's face as she listened. Mrs. Haxton was well aware of the change in the girl's manner, but she did not interrupt the thread of her story, nor seek to alter its significance.

"Mr. Royson knows nothing of these later events

that are so vitally important to him?" she asked, when the other woman's quiet narration ceased its even flow.

"No."

"Then how is it —"

"That I am better informed? It is quite simple. Baron von Kerber intercepted and read all letters and telegrams that came for him by camel post."

Irene rose. Anger flamed in her face, and her brown eyes darkened.

"You dare to tell this to me?" she said.

"Exactly. You gave me permission to speak unreservedly. Please sit down. I have not finished yet."

Somehow, despite her indignation, the girl was swayed into compliance.

"You forget that the twenty-sixth Sir Richard was dead, and that it really did not matter one jot to the twenty-seventh whether he learnt the news a few weeks earlier or later. But it mattered everything to us, to Baron von Kerber and myself, I mean. We were determined that this expedition should succeed, and we boggled at no means which promised to achieve our end. We have been beaten, but not through any fault of ours. We felt, not without good reason, that if Mr. Royson were compelled to return home you would be converted from a passive into an active enemy. So we adopted the leave-well-enough-alone policy, and, as one woman speaking to another, I really don't see what you have to grumble about. Blame us as much as you like, you still have the de-

"You dare to tell this to me?" she said *Page* 290

lightful knowledge that the progress of your love affair was unaffected by titles or wealth, and I have left to you the pleasant duty of telling your fiancé of his good fortune."

"I am afraid your reasoning is too plausible for my poor wits, Mrs. Haxton," said the girl slowly. "Indeed, I am not sure that I care to listen to you any further."

"But you must, you shall," came the fierce outburst. "Do you think I am lowering myself in your eyes without cause? I have told you the plain truth, careless of the worst interpretation you may choose to place on my motives. Now, in return, I want you to make these things known to Mr. Fenshawe. He will be even more disgusted with Baron von Kerber and my wretched self than he is at present, if that be possible. Hence, he will agree, in all probability, to do what we ask — we wish him to give us sufficient equipment and escort to travel direct to the coast from here — at once — within the hour. When we reach the sea we can cross to Aden in an Arab dhow, and neither Mr. Fenshawe nor you will ever see or hear from us again, save in a business sense. It is not a wildly extravagant demand. None of us can look forward with pleasure to a month's journey in company back to Pajura. If I go to Mr. Fenshawe with the proposal I have made to you, he will suspect some hidden intent. He will believe you, and you can convince him that it is the only satisfactory way out of a disagreeable position."

A full minute elapsed before Irene answered.

"I take it that you are here with Baron von Kerber's consent," she said.

"Yes. We discussed matters from every aspect last night. That is why I am so well posted in your movements. We prefer not to await Mr. Royson's return. Alfieri has defeated us. We have lost caste with you and your grandfather. For Heaven's sake, let us go!"

Again there was a pause. For some reason, Irene's sympathies conquered her again. She had risen, and she approached a little nearer.

"I wish to say," she murmured, "that — I am — sorry for you."

Mrs. Haxton looked up at her. Her face was frozen with misery. She seemed to be incapable of tears just then. She stood up, held herself erect for an instant, and walked out of the tent.

"Thank you," she said, without turning her head, as though she wished to avoid the girl's eyes. "Now go, please. Tell Mr. Fenshawe that we shall be glad to get away while it is possible to march. If your grandfather sanctions our plan, we have all details ready for his approval. There need be no delay. We do not want a great deal in the way of stores, and we give our promise to repay the small sum of money which will be necessary for the voyage to Aden and thence to London."

Irene, conscious of some unknown element in this wholly unexpected outcome of the previous evening's discord, hurried off to arouse her grandfather. At that hour the *kafila* was usually beginning the day's march,

but Mr. Fenshawe, like the others, had remained up late, and he was unwilling to be disturbed until his servant told him that his granddaughter was exceedingly anxious to see him.

As soon as she began to relate Mrs. Haxton's story, she realized that it implied a confession of the attachment existing between Royson and herself. She stammered and flushed when it came to explaining the interest she took in all appertaining to Dick, but the old gentleman listened gravely and without comment.

"What do *you* think, Irene?" he asked when she had finished.

"I think we should all be happier and freer from restraint if Mrs. Haxton and the Baron left us," she said.

"I agree with you. Mrs. Haxton, as a chaperone, can easily be dispensed with. You say they have a scheme drawn up for my signature — setting forth the number of camels, etc., they need? Bring it to me. We can go through it together, and you and Stump can check the actual splitting up of the caravan. Of course, they know that we have a thirty days' march before us, as compared with their five or six, and we may also be compelled to remain here another day or two. In the matter of funds I shall be generous, at any rate where the woman is concerned. I believe that von Kerber is a scoundrel, that he has led her blindfolded along a path of villainy, and she thinks now that she cannot recede. However, let us see what they want."

He was somewhat surprised to find that their demands were studiously moderate. Their tent equipage, seven days' supplies, a dozen camels, two horses, and the necessary number of men, made up the list. Mr. Fenshawe gave them sufficient silver for current expenses, and a draft payable in Aden for the steamer and hotel charges, while he sent Mrs. Haxton a note offering her five hundred pounds when she arrived in London, and promising further assistance in the future if she shook herself free of von Kerber.

Irene, who was acquainted with her grandfather's liberal intent, watched Mrs. Haxton closely while she read that kindly message. Her pallid face was unmoved. Its statuesque rigor gave no hint of the thoughts that raged behind the mask.

"Tell Mr. Fenshawe that he has acted exactly as I expected," was her listless reply, and, within five minutes, the small cavalcade started. Mrs. Haxton elected to ride a Somali pony. She mounted unaided, forced the rather unruly animal to canter to the head of the caravan, and thus deliberately hid herself from further scrutiny.

"Poor thing!" murmured Irene with a sigh of relief, and hardly conscious that she was addressing Stump. "I cannot help pitying her, though I am glad she has gone."

"She an' the Baron make a good pair, Miss," said Stump. "I've had my eye on 'em, an' they're up to some mischief now, or my name ain't wot it is."

The girl glanced at him wonderingly, for the sturdy

sailor's outspoken opinion fitted in curiously with her own half-formed thought.

"You would not say that if you knew why they have left us," she said.

"Mebbe not, Miss Fenshawe, an' mebbe you've on'y heard half a yarn, if you'll pardon my way of puttin' it. Anyway, the Baron is in a mighty hurry to be off; an' isn't it plain enough that he doesn't want to be here when Mr. Royson comes back? You mark my words, Miss. You'll hear something that'll surprise you when our second mate heaves in sight."

Never did man prophesy more truly, yet never was prophet more amazed at his own success. . . .

Royson and Abdur Kad'r, flying for their lives, spurred on by the further knowledge that even if they escaped capture or death they yet had to undertake a difficult journey on tired beasts if they would save the expedition from the attack evidently meditated by Alfieri and his cohort of plunderers, the two, then — Englishman and Arab — rode like men who valued their necks but lightly.

Bullets sang close to their ears, and one actually chipped the stock of Dick's rifle, almost unseating him by the force of the blow. But the Bisharins were excited, and forgot their fatigue for a mile or so, by which time night fell, and the uncanny darkness soon rendered it quite impossible to ride at all. They dismounted, and led the camels. Abdur Kad'r, true son of the desert, pressed forward nimbly, since every yard gained was a yard stolen from the pursuers. After a

while they were able to mount again, but now the jaded camels lagged, and not all the sheik's prayers or imprecations could force them even into the regulation pace of two and a half miles an hour.

To make matters worse, a hot breeze sprang up from the south, and stirred the desert into curling sand-wraiths which blinded them and made it hard to detect sounds even close at hand. They were fully thirty miles distant from the camp, with eight hours of darkness before them, during which time they could hope to cover only half the march. The thought rose unbidden that the remaining half must be undertaken in daylight, with wornout camels, while the Hadendowa *kafila* was presumably in fresh condition.

Something of the sort must have been in Abdur Kad'r's mind when he said:

"The misbegotten thieves who follow, Effendi, will count on overtaking us soon after daybreak. We must keep the water-bags fastened until the dawn. Then let the camels empty them."

Royson silently debated the chances for and against an endeavor to rush the journey on foot. If practicable, he would have attempted it, leaving the Arab to save himself and the camels by adopting a longer route. He decided that the project must fail. He could not find the road at night, and his thin boots would be cut to pieces by the rocks before he had gone many miles.

Yet, if they were overtaken, what would happen to Irene and the others? A sharp pain gripped his breast,

and his eyes clouded. He threw back his head, and passed a hand over his clammy brow. The action seemed to clear his brain, and he saw instantly that there was only one course open to him.

"Abdur Kad'r," he said, when a level space enabled them to walk side by side, "which of our camels is the stronger?"

"They are both weary, Effendi, but mine has carried less weight than yours. Ere he fell for the last time, he would lead."

"Listen, then, and do as I say. If we are attacked to-night I shall stand and face our assailants. You ride on alone. I shall try to gain a fair start for you. You know what depends on your efforts. Should you fail, you not only lose life and fortune, but you also endanger the lives of many. You must reach the camp by some means. And, when you see Miss Fenshawe, tell her that my last thought was of her. Do you understand?"

"Effendi —"

"Have you understood my words? Will you deliver that message?"

"Yes, Effendi, but we men of the desert do not fly while our friends fight."

"I well believe it, Abdur Kad'r. Yet that is my order. Will you obey?"

"I like it not, Effendi."

"There is no other way. What can you suggest that will be better? I remain — that is a settled thing. You gain nothing by not trying to escape. And re-

member, these Arabs will think twice before they slay a European."

"They will shoot first and think afterwards, Effendi."

"Well, we shall see. Perhaps they have given up the chase. In case they come upon us, lash your camel into a trot, and wait not for me, because I shall ride back, not forward."

The sheikh muttered a comprehensive curse on things in general and the Hadendowa tribe in particular. They stumbled on in silence for nearly two hours. At the end of that time they descended a difficult slope into a deep wady. Fortunately, they had crossed it by daylight early that morning, so its hazards were vivid in memory. In the rock-strewn bed of the vanished river, Abdur Kad'r halted a moment. The light of the stars was strong enough to reveal the horizon, which was visible through the fall of the valley, and the nearer crests of the neighboring watershed were quite distinct — showing black against luminous ultramarine.

"That seaward track I spoke of, Effendi, passes this way to the hills. The Well of Moses lies down there," and the Arab, more by force of habit than because Royson could see him in that gloomy defile, threw out his chin towards the east.

Suddenly, it struck Royson that provided he had guessed aright, the Roman Legion which sacked Saba must have marched over this identical spot in their effort to reach the Nile. After twenty marches, von Kerber said, they were waylaid by a Nubian clan and

slain — every man — from the proud tribune down to the humblest hastatus. Perhaps they were surrounded in some such trap as this valley would provide. And what a fight that was! What deeds of valor, what hewing and stabbing, ere the last centurion fell at the head of the last remnant of a cohort, and the despairing Greek commissary, gazing wild-eyed from some nook of safety, saw the Roman eagle sink for ever!

Abdur Kad'r, little dreaming of the train of thought he had aroused, moved on again. Dick had drawn taut the head-rope of his unwilling camel when the brute uttered a squeal of recognition, and both men saw several mounted Arabs silhouetted against the northern sky-line. An answering grunt came from one of their camels, and a hubbub of voices sank faintly into the somber depths, as the wind was not felt in that sheltered place.

The sheikh swore fluently, but Royson spoke no word until they were free of the boulders, and had gained a passable incline which led to the steeper path up the opposing cliff.

"Now, Abdur Kad'r —" he said.

"Name of Allah, Effendi, this thing must not be!"

"It must. Go, my good comrade. It is for the best."

Abdur Kad'r smote his camel on the cheek.

"I never imagined, Bisharin, that thou would carry me away from a friend in danger," he growled, "but this is God's doing, and thou art a rogue at all times. I shall either ride thee to death or kill thee for a feast."

He would not bid Royson farewell. Dick heard him tugging the camel forward.

"Forget not my words to the Effendina," he said quietly.

"I shall not forget," came a voice from the darkness, and he was alone.

Though he knew he was face to face with death, he felt no tremor of fear. He surveyed his position coolly, and took his stand in the shadow of a mass of granite close to whose base the track wound up the hillside. In case the unexpected happened, he fastened his camel to a loose stone behind the rock, and the poor animal knelt instantly, thinking that a night's rest was vouchsafed at last. Dick threw off the Arab robes he had worn since Abdur Kad'r and he climbed the hill overlooking Suleiman's Well. He opened and closed the breech of his heavy double-barreled Express rifle to make sure that the sand clouds had not clogged its mechanism, and fingered the cartridges in his cross-belt.

Then he waited. It would take the Hadendowas fully five minutes to come up with him, and he experienced a feeling akin to astonishment that he could bide his time so patiently, without any pang of anxiety, or hope, or agonizing misgiving. He thought of Irene, but only of her welfare. If he were not brought down by a chance bullet early in the fray, he felt quite certain of being able to stave off the final rush long enough to give Abdur Kad'r a breathing spell. He had sufficient confidence in that wily old Arab's resources to believe

that he would outwit his pursuers, provided they lost a good deal of time in passing this barrier.

Plan he had none, save to hail the enemy in Arabic and English, and then put up a strenuous fight for the benefit of those who approached nearest.

Round the shoulder of the rock he could look eastward, and a glimmering mist in that direction reminded him of the sea, and of the *Aphrodite*. What a difference a hundred miles made! The luxuriously appointed yacht sailed out there in the midst of the ghostly cloud not so long ago. And here was he, clutching a rifle and preparing to sell his life in order to save most of her passengers and crew from a sudden attack by a gang of bloodthirsty ruffians led by a frenzied Italian. As a study in contrasts that was rather striking, he fancied.

At last he heard the shuffling of camels' feet and the mutterings of men. The Hadendowas were crossing the river bed.

"Stop!" he shouted, in Arabic. "You die otherwise!"

There was an instant silence. They were evidently not prepared for this bold challenge.

"I am an Englishman," he added, still in Arabic, and, in the belief that some of them might at least recognize the sound of English, he went on:

"You have no right to molest me and my servants. I call on you to return to your master, and set at liberty the Arab Hussain —"

He was answered by a perfect blaze of rifles. Every

man fired at random. At least a dozen bullets crashed against the rock. A violent tug at his left sleeve and some spatters of hot lead on his cheek showed that one missile had come too near to be pleasant. After passing through his coat it had splashed on the granite just behind him.

He did not speak again, nor would he fire until sure of a mark. Another volley lit the darkness. This time he made out the forms of his attackers. They were standing some twenty yards away, and he marveled that they seemed not to see him; though he reflected at once, with the utmost nonchalance, that the blinding flash of the guns screened him quite effectually from their eyes.

Then he saw two dim figures moving swiftly forward. He brought both down, and their yells rent the air.

He sprang sideways, as far as the narrow road permitted, and reloaded. The Arabs aimed wildly at the place where he had just been standing. One of their number screamed a command, and they made a combined rush. He fired both barrels into their midst, clubbed his rifle and jumped forward. That was good generalship, of the sort dear to the heart of his great ancestor. At the first tremendous sweep of his weapon he broke off its stock against an Arab's body. That did not matter. The heavy barrels were staunch, and iron deals harder blows than wood. He was active as a cat, and had the strength of any four of his adversaries. With lightning-like whirls he smote them so resolutely that when five were laid low the rest broke and ran.

He fired both barrels into their midst *Page* 302

He actually pursued them, and brought down two more, before he stumbled over the body of one whom he had shot.

And that ended the fight. He heard men scrambling over the rocks in panic, and he knew by the grunting and groaning of distant camels that all the *kafila* had stampeded. Searching the fallen man at his feet, he found a full cartridge-belt and rifle. He took them, lest there should be further need, but did not relinquish the trusty weapon which had more than equalized an unequal combat.

Then he went to his camel. The terrified brute had risen, and was tugging madly at its rope. It semed to recognize him, and be grateful for his presence, if ever a camel can display gratitude. He gave it the contents of the water-bag, led it to the top of the cliff, and stood there a brief space to listen. Some wounded men were calling loudly for help, and he was sorry for the poor wretches; but there was no response from their flying comrades. He fixed on a star to guide his course by, mounted, and rode away to the south, trusting more to his camel's sense of direction than to his own efforts to keep on the track.

When dawn appeared, a dawn that was glorious to him beyond measure, he caught sight of a precipitous hill which he remembered passing on the outward march. Looking back at the first favorable point, he could see nothing that betokened the presence of Hadendowas, or any other human beings, in all that far-flung solitude. Were it not for the presence of the

Italian rifle and cartridge-belt, and the blood-stained gun-barrels resting across his knees, the fierce struggle in that forbidding valley might have been the delirium of a fever-dream.

He rode on, munching contentedly at a biscuit from his haversack, until his glance was drawn to a cloud of dust hanging in the air, for the unpleasant wind of the previous night had given way to a softer and cooler breeze. He read its token correctly, and smiled at the picture which his fancy drew of Stump, when that choleric skipper heard what had happened to his second mate. Surely he would be among those now hurrying to the rescue!

And he was not mistaken. With Stump came Abdur Kad'r, six of the *Aphrodite's* crew, and a score of well-armed Arabs and negroes. Even before they met, Royson saw two Arabs race back towards the camp, and Stump, after the first hearty congratulations, explained the hurry of those messengers.

"It's mainly on account of Miss Irene," he said. "She took on something awful when the sheikh blew in an' tole us you had gone under. He heard the shootin', you see, an', accordin' to his account, you were as full of lead as Tagg'll be full of beer when he listens to the yarn I'll spin nex' time we meet."

Abdur Kad'r's black eyes sparkled when Royson spoke to him.

"Salaam aleikum, Effendi!" he cried. "You have redeemed my honor. Never again could I have held

up my head had you been slain while I ran. And that shaitan of a camel — he stirred himself. By the Prophet, I must kill an older one to make a feast for my men."

CHAPTER XVII

HOW THREE ROADS LED IN ONE DIRECTION

THE news that her lover was safe restored the sparkle to Irene's eyes and the color to her wan cheeks. Fenshawe, indeed, had not given her the full measure of Abdur Kad'r's breathless recital. Recent events had led the old curio-hunter to view life in less ultra-scientific spirit than was his habit. Perhaps he had re-awakened to the knowledge that the hearts of men and women are apt to be swayed by other impulses than his dry-as-dust interest in dead cities and half-forgotten races. Most certainly he was shocked by the agony in the girl's face when she heard that the sheikh had returned alone, and, if he wondered at the low wail of despair which broke from her lips, he said nothing of it at the moment, but mercifully suppressed Abdur Kad'r's story of the Effendi's resolve to make a stand against his pursuers, and thus enable his companion to reach and warn the camp.

The version Irene heard was that Royson's camel had fallen lame, and it was deemed safer he should hide until help came, than mount behind Abdur Kad'r and risk the slower journey. Fenshawe reasoned that Royson might be captured, not killed. His long

experience of Arab life told him that the tribesmen would be chary of murdering a European, for fear of the vengeance to be exacted later. Nevertheless, this comforting theory was more than balanced by the disquieting facts revealed by the sheikh, who, as he rode wildly to the south, heard a sharp outburst of firing in the valley behind him.

Yet it was well that Irene had not been told the whole truth, else that anxious little heart of hers might have stormed itself into a fever of despair. As it was, her pent emotions found relief in tears of joy when the messengers brought the news of Royson's approach with the rescue party, and her eyelids were still suspiciously red, her lips somewhat tremulous, when, standing by her grandfather's side, she welcomed his return.

Though a hundred eyes were fixed on the two — though some of those eyes watched them with a keenness inspired by the belief that this reunion had in it a romantic element quite apart from the drama of the hour — their meeting apparently partook only of that friendly character warranted by the unusual circumstances. And, in the general excitement, none who looked at Royson paid heed to the hardships he had undergone. He had hardly closed his eyes during two nights and three days, for the rest obtained while he and Abdur Kad'r awaited the outcome of Hussain's embassy was calculated rather to add to his physical exhaustion than relieve it. He had covered eighty miles of desert on scanty fare, and had fought a short

but terrific fight against a dozen adversaries. Yet his cool demeanor and unwearied carriage conveyed no hint of fatigue — to all outward seeming he might have been entering the encampment after an ordinary march, when a basin of water and a change of clothing were the chief essentials of existence. It was not so, of course. Were he made of steel he must have felt the strain of those sixty hours, and he almost yielded to it when he dismounted, and Fenshawe led him inside the mess tent.

The older man invited him to be seated, and tell his adventures while eating the meal which had been prepared for him and Stump as soon as their camels were seen in the distance. But Dick, half unconsciously, still clutched the broken rifle. There were blood stains on his clothing, which was ripped in the most obvious way by bullets that had either wounded him or actually grazed his skin. Fenshawe's keen old eyes made a rapid inventory of these signs of strife, and he forgot, in his anxiety, that Irene was present.

"Good heavens, man," he cried, "you have been in the wars. Did those scoundrels attack you, then? Are you hurt?"

"No," said Dick, sinking into a chair, and trying to speak with his customary nonchalance, "I am not injured — just a wee bit tired — that is all."

Irene flew to his side. She took the soiled gun-barrels from his relaxing grip, and began to unfasten the collar hooks of his uniform.

"Don't you see he is almost fainting?" she demanded,

reproachfully. "Bring some brandy and cold water, quick! Oh, Dick, dear, speak to me! Are you sure you are not wounded? If it is only want of food and sleep, we can soon put that right, but do tell me if you have a wound."

Dick smiled, though he knew his face was white beneath the dust and tan, and he could not lift his arms for the life of him.

"I'm all right," he whispered. "I suppose I'm suffering from heart trouble, Irene. Haven't seen you for two nights and a day, you know."

He must have been a trifle light-headed, or he would not have spoken to her in that way before her grandfather. Mr. Fenshawe, remembering the girl's shyness of the previous day, may have thought a good deal, but said nothing, seeing that Irene was supremely indifferent to either his thoughts or his words at that instant, while Royson seemed to be heedless of any other fact than the exceedingly pleasant one that his beloved was holding a glass to his lips and asking him to gratify her by swallowing the contents.

As for Stump, who was not aware of his second mate's rise in the world, the manner of their speech affected him so powerfully that he was in imminent danger of an apoplectic seizure. His condition was rendered all the more dangerous because he dared utter no word. But he silently used the sailor-like formula which applies to such unexpected situations, and added certain other variations of the rubric from the extensive resources of his own private vocabulary.

He recovered his breath by the time Dick's attack of weakness had passed, and the color of his face slowly subsided from a deep purple to its abiding tint of brick red.

"Rather a sudden indisposition," said Fenshawe to Stump, smiling quizzically as he watched Irene supporting Royson's head while she urged him tenderly to drink a little more of the stimulant.

"Is that wot you call it?" asked the captain of the *Aphrodite*, mopping his glowing cheeks with a handkerchief of brilliant hue. "I thought it was a stroke of some kind, but I've fair lost my bearin's since I gev' over plashin' at sea."

The amazement of the elders at the manner in which those young people addressed each other was slight in comparison with the thrill Royson caused when he had taken some soup, and was prepared to do justice to more solid food.

"I had a rather lively set-to with a number of Hadendowas," he explained in response to a question from Mr. Fenshawe. "It was brief but strenuous, and I assure you it is a marvel that I came out of it practically without a scratch. At any rate, it does not call for a detailed description now, seeing that I have something of vastly greater importance to tell you. May I ask, sir, if you have photographs of the papyrus in your possession?"

"Yes. They are in my tent. Shall I bring them?"

"If you please. I think I have news that will interest you."

"One word before I go. Abdur Kad'r said that the Italians had abandoned Suleiman's Well. Have they found the treasure, do you think?"

"No, sir. Just the reverse. I believe that I have found it myself, and, if I am not mistaken, Mrs. Haxton and the Baron, from what Captain Stump tells me, are now far on their way to the right place, if they have not already reached it."

"Wot did I say, Miss Irene?" broke in Stump fiercely. "Oh, he's deep is that there Baron. I sized him up when he med off yesterday. An' Mrs. Haxton, too! A nice pair of beauties."

"Whatever wrong Mrs. Haxton may have done in the past, I refuse to believe that she was swayed by some merely selfish consideration in leaving us as she did," said Irene softly, and her grandfather thanked her with a look as he quitted the tent.

Stump shook his head.

"She's as artful as a pet fox," he growled; but he had no listeners. Dick and Irene were far too much occupied in gazing at each other.

Mr. Fenshawe returned speedily. He spread out ten photographs on the table in front of Royson. With them was a typewritten document divided into ten sections.

"That is the English translation," he explained. "Each numbered division corresponds with a similar number on a photograph. It simplifies reference."

Dick examined the translation eagerly. The first slip of papyrus read:

"In the seventh year of the reign of the renowned Emperor, C. Julius Cæsar Octavianus, I. Demetriades, son of Pelopidos, merchant of Syracuse, being at that time a trader in ivory and skins at Alexandria, did foolishly abandon my wares in that city, and join the legion sent from Egypt to subdue the people of Shaba."

He saw that the letters in the word "seventh," though writ in archaic Greek, bore the same space relation to the neighboring characters as did all others in the script. Reading on carefully until he came to the first leaf of the papyri in which the "Five Hills" were named, he observed instantly that the word "pente," five, had its letters crowded together. Now the Greek for seven, *hepta*, has only four characters, the aspirate being marked over the initial vowel. This same crowding of "pente" was discernible each time it occurred in the text. It was a coincidence that was too intrusive. The obvious explanation was that "hepta" had been deleted and "pente" substituted in every instance, and the fraud had not been detected because the rest of the Greek writing was absolutely genuine. The hieroglyphs in cartouches, which von Kerber had admittedly tampered with, were beyond Royson's ken.

He was so taken up with this confirmation of his views, and so eager to make clear the queer chance that led Abdur Kad'r to explain the name of the Well of Moses, that he was blind to the growing wrath in Mr. Fenshawe's face until he happened to catch the indignant note in the older man's voice as he bade a

servant summon the sheikh. Then a single glance told him what he had done. The wounded vanity of the famous Egyptologist had risen in its might, and swept aside all other considerations. The man of wealth could permit his charitable instincts to govern the scorn evoked by the Austrian's petty tactics, but the outraged enthusiasm of the collector was a torrent that engulfed charity and expediency alike in its flood. Nothing short of the most painstaking personal examination of the oasis at the Well of Moses would now convince the millionaire that von Kerber had not tricked him at the eleventh hour.

Though the expedition was in Italian territory, though he was aware that a tribe of hostile Arabs was already hovering on the outskirts of the camp, though the presence of Irene rendered it imperative that he should not risk the attack which would probably be made that night, these urgent conditions of the moment did not prevail in the least degree against the maddening suspicion that the self-confessed forger who had duped him had put the seal on a piece of clever rascality by exploiting the real treasure-ground for his own benefit.

Royson was far from expecting this development. Yet, now that it had occurred, he saw that it was inevitable. Before Abdur Kad'r appeared he guessed why Mr. Fenshawe wanted him in such a hurry. Irene, who had never known her grandfather to be so greatly disturbed, whispered earnestly to her lover:

"If grandad wishes you to follow von Kerber, you must be too ill to do anything of the sort."

"Then I shall remain here alone," said he, smiling at her dismay. "Unless I am much mistaken we shall all be hot on his track before we are many hours older."

He was right. When the sheikh came he received orders to prepare for an instant march towards the coast by way of the caravan route. Then the burning zeal of archeology received a check.

"It is impossible that the *kafila* should move in that direction before to-morrow's dawn, O worthy of honor," said Abdur Kad'r emphatically. "We can march south to-day, if Allah wills it, knowing that we shall find food and water within fifteen kilometers without fail. To reach the Well of Moses is a different thing. I have not seen the place during thirty years. We must travel early and late, and carry with us a water supply that will not only suffice for the journey but safeguard us against any failure of the well when we arrive there. What proof have we, Effendi, that it is not choked with sand?"

Fenshawe was too skilled in the varying contingencies of desert life not to admit the truth of the sheikh's reasoning, but he held to the belief that von Kerber had secret information as to the practicability of the route.

"Be it so," he said curtly. "Let every preparation be made. We have no cause to fear these dogs of Hadendowas. I charge myself with the care of the

camp where they are concerned. See to it, Abdur Kad'r, that we start ere sunrise."

The conversation was in Arabic, so Stump could not gather its drift. When he learnt his employer's intentions he roared gleefully:

"By gad, sir, I'm pleased to 'ear you're makin' for blue water once more. Just for a minute I fancied you was tellin' our brown pilot to shove after von Kerber, an' string 'im up."

Mr. Fenshawe laughed grimly.

"The rogue deserves it, but I cannot take the law into my own hands, captain," he said.

"Oh, that wasn't botherin' me," was the offhand answer. "I was on'y wonderin' where you would find a suitable tree."

Fenshawe bent over the table, and asked Royson to go through the papyri with him, comparing the Greek, word for word, with the translation. He himself was able to decipher the hieroglyphs, but the details and measurements they gave might be dismissed as unreliable. Depending, however, on the context, and having ascertained from Abdur Kad'r that the seven small lava hills at Moses's Well stood in an irregular circle near the oasis, it was a reasonable deduction that the Romans had selected a low-lying patch of sand or gravel somewhere in the center of the group as a suitable hiding-place for their loot. It might be assumed that Ælius Gallus meant to sail down the Red Sea again, within a year at the utmost, and recover the spoil when his galleys were there to

receive it. Therefore, he would not dig too deeply, nor, in the straits to which he was reduced, would he waste many hours on the task.

Fenshawe infected Dick with his own ardor. The two were puzzling over each turn and twist of the Greek adventurer's awkward phrases when Irene, who had gone out with Stump, interrupted them.

"Dick," she said, blushing poppy red because she used his familiar name, "you must go and rest at once. I am sure, grandad, you don't want Mr. Royson to break down a second time, do you? And I would like both of you to know that Baron von Kerber took with him no pickaxes. Captain Stump and I have just checked our stock. That seems to be in his favor, I think?"

"If I have done von Kerber an injustice I shall be the first to ask his pardon," said Fenshawe. "At present, I have every cause to doubt the man's motives in leaving us, and I want more than negative proof to acquit him of dishonesty. By the way, Irene, have you told Royson of his good fortune?"

"I have hardly spoken two words to him since he arrived," said she innocently.

"Dear me! That sounds like a strong hint," and Fenshawe very considerately left the two alone. Tired as Dick was, the best part of an hour elapsed before Irene could explain fully that he was now a baronet, with a reasonably large income, or he could make her understand exactly why he was a somewhat frayed out-of-work when they met in London.

Perhaps there were interludes and interruptions,

Perhaps he thought that the limpid depths of her brown eyes offered more attractions than the sordid records of a foolish man's spite and a boy's sufferings. At any rate, it was Irene who finally insisted that this must positively be the last, and who threatened that she would not speak to him again that day if he stirred out of his tent before dinner.

And, indeed, Dick required no rocking when, after a refreshing wash, he stretched his long limbs in his hammock. His sleep was dreamless. He awoke at sundown strong in the conviction that he had hardly closed his eyes.

He and Stump shared the tent, and Dick's uncertain gaze first dwelt on his skipper, who was seated at the door, smoking. Stump removed his pipe from between his teeth:

"Good evenin', Sir Richard," he said solemnly. Then the huge joke he had been cogitating ever since Irene informed him at luncheon that Royson was now a man of title mastered him completely.

"Sink me," he burst forth, "I've had some daisies of second mates under me in me time, but I've never bossed a bloomin' barrow-knight afore. My godfather! Won't Becky be pleased! An' wot'll Tagg say? Pore old Tagg! He'll 'ave a fit!"

"Look here, captain —" began Dick, swinging his feet to the ground. But Stump's slow-moving wits, given full time to get under weigh, were working freely; punctuating each pause with a flourish of his pipe, he continued:

"Lord love a duck, I can see Tagg blowin' in to a snug in the West Injia Dock Road, an' startin' ev'ry yarn with, 'W'en I sailed down the Red Sea with Sir Richard —' or, 'We was goin' through the Gut on a dirty night, an' Sir Richard sez to me —' Well, there, I on'y hope 'e survives the fust shock. W'en 'e gets 'is wind we'll 'ave a fair treat. Mind ye, I 'ad a sort of funny feelin' when you tole me in the train you was my second mate, an' you sat there a-wearin' knickers. It gev me a turn, that did. An' then you took another twist at me by sayin' you'd never bin to sea. I knew things was goin' to happen after that. It must ha' bin, wot d'ye call it — second sight — for I knew then an' there I'd got a prize in the lottery —"

"Oh, shut up!" shouted Royson, diving frantically for his boots.

"That's no way for a barrow-knight to talk to 'is admirin' skipper," said Stump. "But I s'pose, now, it sounds queer to 'ave me a-callin' you Sir Richard, w'en, as like as not, I might be dammin' your eyes as second mate?"

Royson tried to escape. In his hurry he did not notice a bulky letter which lay on the top of one of his leather trunks. Stump called him back.

"You're missin' your mail, Sir Richard," he said, and Dick, perforce, returned. Oddly enough, the letter covered the initials "R. K." painted on the portmanteau. Turning a deaf ear to Stump's further pleasantries, he opened the envelope. A scrawl on a sheet of thin continental note-paper contained the brief

statement that, "by inadvertence," von Kerber had "detained the enclosed letters and cablegrams." The enclosures, which were from Mr. Forbes, bore out the accuracy of Mrs. Haxton's revelations. He was, in very truth, the twenty-seventh baronet of his line, sole owner of Orme Castle and its dependencies, and befitted, by rank, descent, and estate, to take a social position of no mean order.

For an instant he forgot his surroundings. He recalled the stately old house and its beautiful park as he had last seen it, with all its glories rejuvenated by the money that was pouring in to the coffers of his detested relative. And now that malign old man was at rest, after a tardy admission of the grievous evil he had wrought to his brother's wife and son. Well, peace be to his crooked bones! Dick could have wished him safely in Paradise if the wish would restore to life his beloved mother. And she, dear soul — though he had forgotten her last night — perhaps her gentle spirit was shielding him as he stood with his back to the rock and faced the vicious swarm of Arabs in the darkness.

Then Stump's gruff accents broke in on his dreaming.

"Is it O. K., Sir Richard?" he asked. "Them's the papers von Kerber held up, I reckon? Have ye got a clean bill?"

Royson stooped and grasped Stump's shoulder.

"When we reach England, skipper," he said, "you and Tagg, and Mrs. Stump, too, for that matter, must come and see my place in the North. An' I'll tell ye

wot," he went on, with fair mimicry of Stump's voice and manner, "you'll all 'ave the time of your lives, sink me, if you don't!"

Stump glared up at him. No man had ever before dared to reproduce that hoarse growl for his edification, and the effect was electrical. It might be likened to the influence exercised on a bull by the bellow of a rival. He took breath for a mighty effort — and Royson fled.

Be sure that Irene, though vastly occupied with work which von Kerber had performed hitherto — those small but troublesome items appertaining to the daily life of a large encampment — had an eye to watch for Dick's reappearance. She hailed him joyfully:

"Such news! The enemy proclaims a truce. Alfieri has sent in Hussain and Abdullah, not to mention the purloined camel. And one of his own men has brought a note for grandfather, asking an early conference."

At first, Royson was unfeignedly glad of this unlooked for turn in events. He did not share Mr. Fenshawe's optimism in the matter of a night attack by the Hadendowas, because Irene was there — and who could hope to shield her beyond risk of accident when long-range rifles were sniping the camp?

Alfieri's letter was civil and apologetic. He explained that he had no quarrel with the English leader of the expedition — his feud lay with the Austrian and the woman who had helped to despoil him (Alfieri) of his rights. He felt assured, he said, that Signor

Fenshawe — whose fame as an Egyptologist was well known to him — would not be a consenting party to fraud, and he wished, therefore, to arrange a meeting for the following day, when he would state his case fully, face those who had robbed him, and leave the final decision with confidence in the hands of one whose repute made it certain that justice would be done.

The appeal was written in hardly intelligible English, but an Italian version accompanied it, and Irene was able to translate every word of the latter.

"Of course, grandad agreed," said Irene. "He has fixed on seven o'clock to-morrow for the conference. I am looking forward with curiosity to seeing Alfieri again. I remember him perfectly. Captain Stump and I had a good look at him in Massowah, you know."

"Has the messenger gone back already?"

"Oh, yes. He left the camp two hours ago."

"Did he speak to any of our men?"

"He may have done so. I'm not sure. We were so taken up with Alfieri's communication that we gave no heed to the Arab. But grandad said, by the way, that it was just as well he should see our strength, and that we had a dozen armed sailors here, in addition to so many natives. You are worrying about me, I suppose? Allow me to observe that I, as staff officer, have assisted the commander-in-chief to divide our forces into two strong guards for the night. Grandfather commands one, Captain Stump the other, while you, O King, have to sleep soundly until the dawn."

"But I have just slept eight hours!"

"Oh, well, being on the staff, I also arranged that we should mount guard together until eleven o'clock."

It went against the grain to dash her high spirits with the doubt that had seized him as soon as he heard of the Hadendowa Arab's departure. In all probability, the man had found out that von Kerber and Mrs. Haxton were no longer in the camp. The negro syces and other attendants were inveterate gossips, and it would be strange if they had not told him that some of their number were marching towards the sea with the Hakim-Effendi and one of the Giaour women. What would happen were this knowledge to come to Alfieri's ears? The man who had not scrupled to order the pursuit and capture — the death, if need be — of Royson himself and Abdur Kad'r, was not a stickler at trifles. It was reasonable to suppose that he was making overtures of peace solely because his scouts had revealed the size of the expedition. How would he act under these fresh circumstances? Judging by the pact, there could be only one answer.

"Now what is it?" pouted Irene, trying to assume an injured air when she saw the grave look in her lover's face. "Perhaps you don't care for the eleven o'clock idea? I thought you would like to sit and smoke, and tell me everything that happened since — since I said good-by to you the other evening, but, of course —"

"If you gaze at me so reproachfully, Irene, I shall

kiss you now, this instant, under the eyes of every man, horse, and camel."

"Well, then, what is the matter? I know something is worrying you. I can read your face like a book."

"I distrust Alfieri, dearest,— that is all."

"But he simply dare not fight us. Grandad knows these Arabs for many years. He says that they depend wholly on a surprise. And how can we be surprised, when Alfieri himself admits that he is near, and has actually sent Abdullah, who can tell us the exact number of his men?"

"I think I shall call you Portia, not Irene, if you reason things out in that fashion."

She stamped a foot in mock anger.

"That is your old trick," she said. "You try to hide your thoughts by an adroit twist in the conversation. Out with it! What do you really fear?"

"Let us find Abdullah. Then I shall tell you."

The Spear-thrower, though polite, was not disposed to be communicative. The absence of the two people who were his allies had puzzled him, and none of the Arabs could meet his inquiries as to the motives which led to their sudden journey. In this man's attitude Royson found ample corroboration of his own estimate of Alfieri's views under similar conditions. Abdullah obviously did not believe that von Kerber had abandoned the quest. He fancied he was betrayed. If the chance offered, he might be expected to throw in his lot with Alfieri.

Though Irene was listening, and Dick was sure she

had hit on the true cause of his anxiety, he determined to win Abdullah's loyalty. So he told him of Mr. Fenshawe's resolve to follow the seaward route.

"Your interests, whatever they may be, are absolutely safe if you trust us," he said. "The Baron is only two marches ahead of us. He does not know we are going the same way. He thinks we are making for Pajura, so we will most certainly overtake him at the coast, if not earlier. Thus, you can convince yourself of his good faith, and you can see for yourself that the ultimate decision of affairs must rest with us."

The Arab bowed, but he kept a still tongue. Yet he admitted afterwards that Royson's words had diverted him from his fixed intent to steal off when night fell, and urge Alfieri to pursue the runaways.

The Italian needed no urging. Dick advised Mr. Fenshawe to send out two men on horseback in order to locate the Hadendowas. Hussain, who was acquainted with the country, volunteered for this duty, and he and his companion came in at midnight with the depressing report that Alfieri and his free-booters were not to be found on the main track to Suleiman's Well.

By this time, not only Fenshawe and Irene, but Stump and Abdur Kad'r, when called into counsel, shared Dick's foreboding. It was impossible to do anything before dawn, and the sole difficulty that remained was to decide whether they should march when the first streaks of light showed in the sky, or await the hour fixed for the interview with Alfieri.

They resolved to leave Hussain and a few trustworthy men at the oasis, with instructions to remain there until eight o'clock. If Alfieri kept his tryst, they were to give him a letter, written by Irene, which asked him to follow and join the expedition. Otherwise, they were to ride after the caravan at top speed, and report his non-arrival.

So Dick and Irene missed that agreeable watch under the stars, and their thoughts, instead of being given to each other, were centered on the unlucky fortune-hunters whom accident or design had separated from them.

Yet, when the sun rose over the desert, it was exhilarating enough to find themselves riding side by side once more. The order of march was simple but well designed. Abdur Kad'r, in command of several Arabs on Bisharin camels, provided a mounted screen half a mile in front. Fenshawe, Royson and Irene, with some of the sailors, formed the advance guard. Then came the *kafila* proper, with the remainder of the *Aphrodite's* crew, under Stump's charge, as a rear-guard. They had halted for breakfast, and were preparing for another long march before the heat of the sun enforced a rest, when Hussain overtook them. At eight o'clock Alfieri had not visited the *rendezvous*, nor was he to be seen an hour later from the summit of the last hill which gave a view of the oasis.

Ill news is little the better because it is expected, and every one was wishful to push on as quickly as possible. But the desert was inexorable in its limita-

tions. Great speed means great exhaustion, and consequently greater demand for water. Nevertheless, they risked the chance of a dry spell at the journey's end, and, finally, despite Irene's protests against being left behind, Royson and Abdullah, with six of the *Aphrodite*'s men, and Abdur Kad'r, at the head of thirty picked Arabs, went on at a spanking pace. They were now on the actual caravan path, having reached it by a cross-country line. According to the sheikh's calculations, they were ten miles from the Well of Moses at four o'clock, and sunset would take place at half-past six. The road was a bad one, and their camels were beginning to lag, but they counted on reaching the ancient camping-ground about half past five. Abdullah was the first to discover recent signs of a large *kafila* having passed that way. He it was, too, who raised a warning hand when they emerged from a wide valley and crossed a plateau, which, roughly speaking, was three miles from the well.

They halted, and strained eyes and ears. They could see nothing, owing to a few scattered hummocks in front, but they caught distinctly the irregular thuds of distant rifle-firing. That was enough. Careless of the rough going, or the condition of their camels at the close, they raced ahead madly. There was no question now of the odds they might have to face. Though the Hadendowas were well armed, and outnumbered them by two to one, Royson felt that the presence of the Englishmen, all of whom were ex-sailors of the Royal Navy, would nerve his Arab

helpers to attack and defeat Alfieri's band of cut-throats. Moreover, von Kerber and his small escort were evidently making a fight of it, and, while daylight lasted, the Hadendowas, once discovered, would endeavor to shoot down their quarry at a safe range rather than undergo the certain loss of an open assault.

How long could the unequal contest be maintained — that was the question that tortured Dick. Many times during that wild ride he asked it, and the only answer he received was given by despair. It came to him through a spume of dust and flying sand, and the rattle of accouterments, and the plaints of frenzied camels, and the yells and curses of the strangely-assorted company of deliverers as they plunged across the desert towards the Well of the Seven Hills. And its discordant shriek was, "Too late! Too late! The gods have frowned on the pillagers of Saba, and the wrath of the gods is everlasting!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FINDING OF THE TREASURE

Royson, a soldier by instinct if not by training, realized the folly of dashing blindly into a fray the nature of which was hidden from him. Though the plight of his erstwhile companions must be desperate — though the lengthening shadows warned him that the time ran short — it was all-important that he should learn the manner and direction of the attack, and the means adopted by von Kerber for repelling it, ere the presence of the relieving force became known. He had heard much of the fighting qualities of the Hadendowas. They were brave, but they were not given to throwing their lives away uselessly. Judging by the steady crackling of musketry, they were "eating up" the smaller contingent with the least possible risk to themselves. They were quite capable of delivering a fierce charge when they witnessed the approach of the rescuers, or, on the other hand, they might allow the newcomers to combine with von Kerber, and depend on their rifle fire to dispose of the reinforced defense. He must decide quickly, once he knew the conditions, and it was imperative, therefore, that something in the nature of a reconnaissance should

be conducted from the shoulder of the rising ground which terminated the plateau. By shouting to Abdur Kad'r and signaling to his own men, Dick managed to check the furious onward rush of the detachment. It was no easy matter to stop the excited camels. The stubborn brutes were equally unwilling either to travel at such a rate or to abandon it. Before the sky-line was reached, however, they were pulled up. Royson, Abdur Kad'r and Abdullah dismounted, and ran rapidly to the crest, dodging behind rocks and broken ground until they secured a clear view of the panorama in front. It was a singular and, in one respect, a disconcerting scene that met their anxious gaze.

The only practicable road descended rapidly towards an immensely wide and shallow depression. Conceivably, this basin might have been formed by the subsidence of the land all round an extinct volcano, whose one-time activity was revealed by a cluster of small cones in the distance. Running due east, and passing north of the crater thus curiously marked, was the arid river-bed which created the oasis, and rendered possible the well which gave its name to the place. Unfortunately, the group of lava hillocks was situated much beyond the center of the hollow. They were commanded by small hills on three sides, and, though capable of defense in some respects, they offered the grave disadvantage of being in a circle. Consequently, the only section secure from an enemy's fire was that on the western side, and it was evident that the defenders had found this to be actually the case. They

were, of course, clearly visible from the ridge, where, unknown to them, the leader of a strong relief was then lying in the cleft of a rock split to its base by extremes of heat and cold.

Dick counted the cones. There were seven of them. Though fully a mile and a half distant, he could see Mrs. Haxton sitting between two huge boulders. Von Kerber was near her, and the few Arabs with them were scattered among the rocks in positions whence they could return the incessant fusillade poured on them from the hills. Their camels were huddled in a hollow between the two westerly mounds, and, so far as Royson could judge, the little party had not yet sustained many casualties. But the tactics of their assailants were quite obvious. The Hadendowas, silently and unseen, had occupied the higher ground on the north, east, and south. They had probably stampeded the unsuspecting *kafila* from the open oasis, because a couple of tents and some camp equipage still stood there, and it was their intent to creep nearer, pushing the horns of an ever-closing crescent steadily westward, until a junction effected just before sunset would permit of a successful rush. Indeed, all doubt on this point was dispelled by the discovery of two strong companies of Hadendowas gathering on the reverse slopes of the nearest hills. They were mounted, mostly on camels. They did not reveal their existence by taking part in the firing. They seemed to be waiting some signal before they rode out into the plain, to complete the merciless ring which would

then surround the doomed occupants of the Seven Hills.

There was not a moment to be lost, and Royson, having formed his plan, put it into instant operation. He and the six sailors would be the first to cross the sky-line, while a few Arabs would accompany them, but hurry back as soon as they were visible, giving the impression that they had gone to summon others. The men from the *Aphrodite* would ride straight, at top speed, towards the beleaguered party. Two minutes later, Abdur Kad'r was to lead half his Arabs over the ridge and make for the enemy's right wing, while, after a similar interval, Abdullah, at the head of the remaining detachment, would similarly dash into sight and advance against the enemy's left. The opposing force would thus see three successive waves of rescuers, each apparently stronger than its predecessor, coming from the only direction whence succor was possible. Alfieri and his followers were well aware already of the strength of Mr. Fenshawe's expedition. If they imagined that it was advancing in its full numbers, they might break and run without firing another shot. If, however, they showed fight, Abdur Kad'r and Abdullah had most stringent orders not to pursue the flanking parties, which they would certainly drive in on the main body. They were to converge towards the hillocks, where Royson would, by that time, have brought hope and renewed courage to their hard-pressed friends. Then, granted that the Hadendowas dared a general attack, the whole force, rescuers and rescued, were to fall back,

converting the struggle into a rear-guard action, and compelling the Hadendowas to relinquish the advantage of the higher ground. Once they came into the open, Royson counted on the superior shooting of his six sailors — all marksmen of the Royal Navy — to turn the scale unmistakably in his favor, while his Arabs had the confidence of knowing that each mile they gained in the retreat brought them nearer the powerful caravan in the rear.

The scheme was excellent in every way. Under ordinary conditions it would have achieved success, but the sane mind can never take into reckoning the vagaries of the insane, and it is quite certain that Alfieri, worn alike by hardship and long brooding over his wrongs, either went stark staring mad at the spectacle of relief being forthcoming for those whom he believed to be entrapped, or gave instant rein to the frenzy already consuming him.

At a moment, then, when it was suicidal to attempt an attack which his men had refused to carry out under the much less dangerous conditions that prevailed all day — it was ascertained afterwards that the first shower of bullets fell into the startled camp about ten o'clock that morning — at that moment, Alfieri, screaming curses in Italian and Arabic, called on those nearest to follow him, and rode out from the shelter of one of the small hills. In sheer excitement, a few Hadendowas obeyed his wild command. They had not far to go, but the rocky water-course barred the track and they must cross it slowly. Now, above all

else, was the time for the sorely-tried little band under von Kerber to stand fast. They could have shot at their leisure Alfieri and each man of the half dozen who came with him. Already three groups of yelling men were stirring the dust into life as they scampered to the rescue across the comparatively level floor of the basin. In five minutes, or less, the Hadendowa attack would be rolled back into the hills, and neither friend nor foe had any other thought than that the whole of Mr. Fenshawe's *kafila* was pouring its irresistible power into the fray.

The situation was precisely one of the suddenly-arising and acute crises in warfare which accentuate the difference between races. While von Kerber, and Mrs. Haxton, too, for that matter, saw the urgent need of prolonging the desperate strife for just those few minutes, their Arabs, after fighting coolly and bravely throughout an exhausting day, now quite lost their heads. Heedless of the Austrian's prayers and imprecations, heedless of Mrs. Haxton's shrill appeal that they should beat off the few assailants then perilously close at hand, they yielded to the blind instinct of self-preservation, and rushed pell-mell for the camels. At once these men of a martial tribe, men who had cheerfully faced the far greater danger of the Hadendowa general attack, became untrammeled savages, each striving like a maniac to secure a mount for himself, and careless whether or not his employers and comrades escaped also.

Many of the camels were wounded, some were dead,

and valuable time was wasted, even in this disgraceful *sauve qui peut*, in a deadly struggle for possession of such animals as could move. Von Kerber, when it was borne in on him that to obtain a camel meant life for Mrs. Haxton and himself, shouted to her to keep close to him, and ran in front of a mounted Arab who had emerged from the mêlée. He ordered the man to halt, and, so near were Royson and his tiny squadron just then, that the camel might have brought all three into safety. But the Arab bent his head, and urged the swaying beast into a faster trot. Von Kerber fired at him, and the unhappy tribesman tumbled from his perch like a dummy figure. Snatching at the camel's head-rope, the Austrian lifted, almost threw Mrs. Haxton up to the saddle. Owing to its height from the ground, it was impossible to place her there securely, but she helped him bravely, scrambled somehow to the awkward seat, and stooped to drag him up behind. She had succeeded, by main force. The excited beast was plunging forward again to get away from the affrighting turmoil close to its heels, when a heavy thud shook the huge frame, the camel fell to its knees, lurched over on its side, and threw both riders heavily.

Von Kerber alone rose. He was dazed for an instant, but he seemed to have a dim consciousness of the quarter from which mortal peril threatened, for he turned and faced Alfieri, who had reined in the Somali pony he rode and was taking deliberate aim at his enemy. The Italian carried a repeating rifle. It was he who had brought down the camel with a well-judged

shot through the lungs, and, with the same venomous accuracy, he now sent a bullet through von Kerber's breast. The stricken man dropped on all fours, and glared up at his murderer. Then, nerving himself for a supreme effort of hate, he raised his own revolver and fired three times at Alfieri. Twice he missed, owing to the restiveness of the horse, but the third shot hit the Italian in the center of the forehead.

When Royson found them, they were lying within a few feet of each other. Alfieri was dead. His pale student's features, softened by the great change, wore a queer look of surprise. Von Kerber was alive, but dying. He had fallen on his face, and Dick lifted him gently, resting the drooping head against his knee.

"Are you badly wounded?" he asked, knowing well by the ashen pallor beneath the bronze of the desert that the man's stormy life was fast ebbing to its close. A dreadful froth bubbled from von Kerber's lips, and the words came brokenly:

"That Italian beast — I hit him, yes?"

"I suppose so. I could not see what happened. But he is dead. Pay no heed to him. Tell me what is best to be done for you."

"Dead! *Ach, lieber Gott!* That is good. . . . I — I am finished — *I* know. . . . Go to Mrs. Haxton. Tell her . . . the treasure . . . Fenshawe will be generous. . . ."

And that was all. He did not die instantly, but

consciousness failed, and the soul soon fluttered out of the limp body with a sigh.

Dick laid the inanimate form on the desert. He went to look for Mrs. Haxton. She was stretched, apparently lifeless, beneath the camel's shoulder. Royson seized the huge beast by the neck and flung it aside bodily. So far as he could judge, she was uninjured, though he feared the camel might have broken one of her limbs or fractured a rib, because his first thought was that the animal had fallen on top of her. But his anxiety was soon dispelled when he forced some of the contents of his water-bottle between her set teeth. She sobbed twice, and her bosom rose and fell spasmodically. Then, with a sudden return to the full use of her senses which was almost uncanny, she wrested herself free from his arms and shrank away, quivering, while her eyes gazed at him with awful questioning. As she looked she seemed to understand that this man who had held her so tenderly was not the man whom she feared to see. The reaction was too great. Dick watched the glance of recognition fading away into insensibility. With a little gasp, she fainted again, but he knew, this time, that her collapse was the natural sequel to the ordeal she had gone through. He roughly bundled a camel cloth into a pillow, laid her head on it, and gave the attention that was necessary to events elsewhere.

He had appreciated the fatal error of the friendly Arabs in deserting their stronghold. Though he and his companions pressed on at a dangerous speed, they

could do nothing to stop the panic. Some of the runaways almost charged into them, and seriously interfered with their view of the advancing Hadendowas. That was only for a moment, but seconds are precious when men are shooting at point-blank range, and Royson was lashing an Arab out of his path at the instant Alfieri fired the first shot at the double-laden camel. The Hadendowas scattered and fled when they caught a glimpse of the white faces. But they did not get away unscathed. Slipping out of their saddles, four of the *Aphrodite's* crew opened fire, and brought five of the robber tribesmen headlong to earth, while the sixth saved his skin by falling with his wounded camel and skulking unnoticed to the hills along the water-course. As for the remainder, the flanking parties bolted before Abdur Kad'r or Abdullah could get within striking distance, and from that hour no sensible Hadendowa came near the Well of Moses for many a month.

In fact, Royson found that his own men were already standing quietly in a group, waiting for orders, and the two detachments of caravan Arabs were coming in from the wings in accordance with his preconcerted plan. Some of the bolting escort were returning. They looked shamefaced when they passed von Kerber lying dead on the ground. One of them, a Hadji, who wore the green turban and black cloak of a pilgrim to Mecca, began to murmur an explanation to Royson, but the giant Effendi gave him such a glance of scorn and anger that the man made off, lest the evil from

which he had fled might yet befall him. In the immediate foreground were several prostrate forms, mostly Arabs injured in the fight for the camels, and so gravely wounded that they could not move. A struggling camel or two, screaming and kicking in agony, seemed to be strangely out of place in the peaceful hush which instantly enfolded the desert. The shouting and musketry that made pandemonium there a few minutes earlier had vanished. The tops of the more distant mountains were glowing in purple and gold, and the blue of the sky was deepening. In that brief hour before the utter darkness that follows sunset the desert has a rare beauty. It has lights and shades denied to softer landscapes. Titania's bower can show no more brilliant color effects. It is then a fit background for romance and mystery, but it breathes no hint of war or death, and such things wear a sacrilegious aspect when brought forcibly into those fairy-like surroundings.

Royson, though he had watched the transformation of rock and arid earth many a time with kindling eyes, gave small heed to the dream-face of nature as he scanned the splendid prospect for sign of further attack by the Hadendowas. He found none, but he happened to note the furtive manner of some among the Arab escort who were hastening toward the small hollow enclosed by the Seven Hills.

Then he remembered why this solitary place had become a Golgotha. The hapless von Kerber was disinterring the treasure when the Hadendowa assault

began. In all likelihood, had the free-booters ridden boldly up in the first instance, the fight would have ended in less minutes than it had occupied hours. And these other ghouls, before they were driven off by a hail of lead, had learnt what store of wealth was buried there beneath the sand.

"Chaytor," said Royson, addressing one of the crew who had acted as quartermaster on board the yacht, "take three men and mount guard over any trench or other excavation you may find in the valley between those mounds. Let no Arab even approach the place. Use force if necessary, but try and avoid any shooting. I shall join you there before sunset."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Chaytor. He named three men, and the four hurried to their post. Bidding the other two sailors help him, Royson turned to carry out a disagreeable task. Von Kerber, Alfieri, and the rest must be buried while there was yet light. He meant to make a rough inventory of documents and letters found in the pockets of the Europeans. The Arabs would scoop shallow graves where the sand was deepest, and pile heavy stones over the bodies to protect them from jackals. Such was the simple ceremony of the desert. And it demanded haste.

But a distressing sight awaited him. Mrs. Haxton was kneeling by von Kerber's side, and weeping in a heart-broken way. He went to her, and said, almost in a whisper:

"You can do no good by remaining here. Won't you go to the tent that is fixed in the oasis, and wait

there until I join you? I shall not be long. You understand — it is for the best."

She raised her streaming eyes, and he had never before seen such a grief-stricken face.

"Mr. Royson," she murmured dully, "let me pray yet a little while."

"Indeed I am sorry for you," he said. "Yet I must urge you to go. We have not a moment to lose."

"To lose? What else can happen?"

"The night is coming. We cannot leave the bodies here. It would be too horrible."

"Ah," she sighed, "there is no horror to equal mine. I have the blood of three men on my soul."

She suffered him to lead her away. He tried to console her by throwing all the responsibility on to the Italian. But he felt that this palsied woman scarce listened to his words. He was almost glad to leave her alone with her mournful thoughts. In active work he could find distraction from the sad influences of this fatal treasure-hunt. There were still many things he did not comprehend, but he resolutely dismissed all self-communing. Perhaps, when the first paroxysm of woe had exhausted itself, Mrs. Haxton might explain; meanwhile, he must endeavor to hide the chief features of the tragedy ere Irene arrived.

When he moved Alfieri's body in order to examine his clothing, he saw that the man's coat was torn at the breast, the cloth having caught a jagged rock as its wearer fell from the saddle. Through this rent a

pocketbook and some papers had slipped out. They were resting on a little sand drift at the base of the rock that had caused the damage. The pocketbook was open. Some of the sand had entered its compartments. And, in one of them, were the papyrus leaves found in the tomb of Demetriades, the Greek, whose mortal eyes were the last that had gazed on the treasure of Sheba! In truth, here was one of the world's dramas, with its scenes divided by two thousand years, yet the parched desert was content to wait there placidly, in sure and certain knowledge that the curtain would rise again on that grim play, whether the years were few or many between the acts. How little changed was the stage. But what of the actors? Did the modern troupe differ so greatly from the two-thousand-year-old cast — the merchant in ivory and skins who quitted his quiet business at Alexandria to seek adventure and gold, the Romans who went to kill and plunder an inoffensive people, the Nubians who waylaid them, and left their bones to bleach? Assuredly, looking at the dozen or more dead bodies stretched in a row at his feet, Royson deemed mankind as unchangeable as the desert.

* * * * * * * *

At two o'clock, when the stars and a new moon were dimly lighting the circle of hills, an Arab vedette reported the approach of a large *kafila* from the west. Soon the jingle of accouterments and the cries of camels who scented the oasis heralded the arrival of the main body. When Dick lifted a weary Irene from

the saddle he made no pretense of shyness, but kissed her quite heartily.

Yet Dick's tidings caused grave faces in the small circle round the camp-fire. Mr. Fenshawe, as responsible leader of the expedition, felt the weight of this added burthen of death. There was no gainsaying the fact that he had been dragged into an unlawful enterprise. He was in Italian territory against the will of the authorities. Though he and those under his control were guiltless of actual wrong-doing, it was exceedingly unfortunate that Alfieri had not lived to make a deposition. The treasure-seekers must now depend on the testimony of the wounded Hadendowas, four of whom had surrendered voluntarily, for the one great principle which the East has learnt from the West is that Europeans usually show humanity to a disabled foe. Abdullah, too, assured the millionaire that the Italian officer who accompanied Alfieri from Massowah warned the latter against any act of violence, and would have restrained him from undertaking an apparently useless search if the instructions received from Rome had not directed that "every assistance was to be given to Signor Giuseppe Alfieri."

There could be no manner of doubt that the Italian had begun an unprovoked attack on the smaller *kafila*. His only messengers were bullets, and the orders he issued to the Hadendowas were definite. The whole party was to be exterminated, with the exception of Mrs. Haxton, who was to be taken alive if possible. Again, there was direct evidence of his duplicity with

regard to the meeting arranged for that morning. Fenshawe's friendly letter was found among his papers, so he had hurried from his camp on the Suleiman's Well route with the deliberate intention of wiping out of existence the man who was his sworn enemy. Still, the affair wore an ugly look, and tired though he was, Fenshawe had no thought of rest until the contradictory elements of a most perplexing business were sifted.

He was seated near the fire with Royson and Stump. Irene had gone to Mrs. Haxton the instant she heard Dick's tragic story.

"Has Mrs. Haxton thrown any light on events?" Fenshawe asked. "You say she was completely broken down. Did you gather from her words that von Kerber brought her here knowing that this oasis was the place described by the Greek?"

"She did not even mention the treasure. Perhaps I could have induced her to speak, but —"

"You forbore. I am glad of it. Has any of the loot been discovered?"

"It was dark when I visited the trench von Kerber was cutting. Alfieri sent a volley at him, and stopped the work before much was done, but the Arabs tell me that some leather wallets are visible. The men who were here this morning know that the contents are valuable, so I have stationed an armed guard there."

"I wish I could destroy every vestige of the wretched stuff. There is a curse on it."

Fenshawe's tone revealed how deeply he was moved.

"Where is Abdullah?" he cried suddenly. "If he

will tell us the truth, we may reach firm ground in the midst of all this morass of lies and treachery. Send for him. He is an Arab, and, if he thinks his interests are bound up with ours, he will speak."

Abdullah, surveying the conclave from afar, had arrived at an opinion that justified this estimate. His first words shed light on a dark place in the records of the two men who were lying side by side in the safe keeping of the desert. His command of French rendered conversation easy, except to Stump, and he was quite explicit.

"Madam is beautiful, is it not?" he said, indicating Mrs. Haxton's tent by a graceful gesture "Seven years ago, she was the most beautiful woman in Egypt. Her husband should not have brought her here. By Mahomet, Egypt is no place for the good-looking wife of a poor man. That is the cause of all the trouble, messieurs. Elegant birds require gilded cages, and Monsieur Haxton had not money enough. I met them first in Massowah, where she lived in the hotel, while her husband went up and down the Red Sea in a ship. Alfieri was there, and he also was poor, but he ruined himself in trying to win her away from Monsieur Haxton. He failed, and, like many another man, that only made him worse. When Monsieur Haxton was sent to Assouan by a new company, Alfieri went there, too. It was at that time I found the papers which tell about the treasure —"

"How do you know they tell about the treasure?" broke in Fenshawe.

"Because I stole them from Monsieur Haxton," was the cool reply. "I had sold them to Monsieur Alfieri, and he gave them to Madame's husband. Monsieur le Baron was his doctor, and a friend, but, when he found out how valuable those papers were, he hired me to secure them from Monsieur Haxton's bureau while he slept. Unfortunately, there was an accident. Monsieur Haxton was in a fever, and the doctor gave him a sleeping draft. Monsieur Haxton took too much, and he never woke again."

Fenshawe's face grew dark with anger.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "Between you, you poisoned the man. I recollect the incident now. I saw it in the papers at the time."

"You are wrong, Monsieur," said Abdullah calmly. "There was an inquiry, and it was proved that the draft was only a strong one — quite harmless if the doctor's written orders were obeyed. True, none but I and the Baron knew why the Englishman should sleep so soundly that night, but it was not meant to kill him. Monsieur Alfieri charged the doctor with having committed a crime, so Monsieur Haxton's friends had the affair fully examined into. It was really an accident. Monsieur le Baron was exceedingly grieved."

"But he kept the papers?" was Fenshawe's grim comment.

"By the Kaaba, and why not? Here was Monsieur Alfieri trying to hang him, and all because Madame would not have anything to do with him. You see,

there was every reason why the Hakim Effendi should get the papers. Monsieur Haxton was fool enough to tell Alfieri something about them."

"Probably Monsieur Haxton meant to play the part of an honest man."

"It may be. Who knows? Yet it is certain that Alfieri would never have shared the treasure with Monsieur Haxton if he had known what the writing was about. On the other hand, Monsieur le Baron told Madame everything, and he promised me a good share for helping him. When he went to England he left me to watch Alfieri. They were always enemies, those two."

Dick remembered the letter in Arabic he had seen von Kerber reading on the night they met in the Austrian's house. And he recalled, too, with a shiver, Mrs. Haxton's agonized words when he tried to lead her away from the dead man who had dared so much for her sake. She had "the blood of three men on her soul," she said. One of those men was her husband. In that dark hour what terrible shadows had trooped from the tomb to torture her! He said nothing to his companions. She knew. He only guessed, and he left it at that.

* * * * * * * *

Next day many hands completed the task von Kerber had begun. But Fenshawe had made up his mind on a course of action, and he adhered to it rigidly. The list given by Demetriades was almost correct. One hundred and seventy wallets were brought to light,

just two less than the number stated by the Greek. They were left unopened. Exactly as they were taken from the sand so were they sealed and set aside until transportation details were arranged. Mr. Fenshawe pointed out to the men from the *Aphrodite* how important it was that the treasure should be made over to the Italian Government intact. By that means alone could their story be justified, and he guaranteed that no one should suffer financial loss by reason of his decision.

Mrs. Haxton was too ill to be either questioned or consulted. She was carried to the sea almost at death's door, and her ultimate recovery was doubtful even a fortnight later, when the *Aphrodite* brought them all to Aden. And it may be said here that the monetary value of the treasure was not great — its utmost figure being placed at £50,000. The two missing wallets were those containing the gems. Probably that was another story which the desert has in safe keeping. The Italian Foreign Office behaved generously to the disappointed archeologist. He was acquitted from any blame in regard to the affray at the Well of Moses, and he was asked to select for his own collection twelve of the ancient Persian and Indian gold vases which formed the chief prizes of the hoard.

But that was long afterward, when Sir Richard and Lady Royson were on their honeymoon trip to Japan, when Captain and Mrs. Stump, attended by the faithful Tagg, had enjoyed the "time of their lives" at Orme Castle, and when Mrs. Haxton, elegant as ever, but

very quiet and reserved in manner, was living in a tiny villa at Bath, where Mr. Fenshawe's munificence had established her for the remainder of her days. She said, and there was no reason to disbelieve her, that von Kerber had no knowledge of the identity of the oasis at the Well of Moses. He went that way to the sea by sheer accident and became half crazy with excitement at the sight of the Seven Hills. It was his fixed intention, she declared, to send word to Fenshawe as soon as he had ascertained, beyond range of doubt, that the Sheban loot was really buried there.

Dick and his wife passed a fortnight at Cairo on their voyage home. They chanced to admire some old praying carpets in a shop in the bazaar, and asked the price. They offered half the sum named, and the attendant, a slim youth, said he would consult his father.

A tall, stoutly-built Arab came from a dark inner apartment. His regular, somewhat grave, features at once expanded into a delighted smile.

"By the Prophet!" he exclaimed in excellent French, "I am overjoyed at seeing you, Monsieur et Madame. You will drink coffee with me, is it not? And, as for the rugs, take them. They are yours. I set up a shop with the money Monsieur Fenshawe gave me, and I am prosperous. *Que diable!* That was a lucky journey for me when we all went south together. I have left the desert now. Behold! I am a good citizen, and pay taxes."

Irene laughed. She had never pictured Abdullah

the Spear-thrower as a shop-keeper, and waxing fat withal.

"You, at any rate, found treasure at the Well of Moses," she cried.

Abdullah glanced at her happy, smiling face. He turned to Royson, and bowed, with something of his former grace.

"Let me congratulate you, Monsieur, on your far greater fortune," he said.

THE END

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